

The New Criterion

February 2002

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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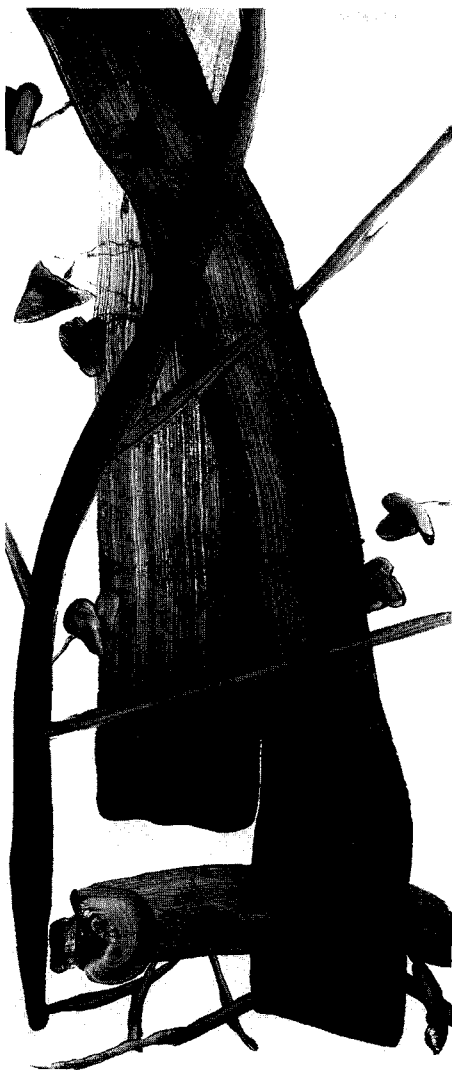
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Notes & Comments:

February 2002

Harvard's black comedy

Of the many things to be observed about the controversy that has lately erupted at Harvard University over the so-called stars of its Black Studies department, the first is that it has been a welcome and indeed belated development in every respect but one: President Lawrence H. Summers's hasty, unpersuasive recourse to the fiction of a "terrible misunderstanding." We see no evidence of a misunderstanding on either side of the events that triggered this controversy, neither in President Summers's perfectly legitimate attempt to persuade Professor Cornel West to begin meeting a standard of scholarship that is worthy of the high academic appointment he enjoys on the Harvard faculty, nor in Professor West's prompt response to this suggestion, which was not to cite any recent scholarly achievements—apparently there aren't any—but to hire an attorney, an act clearly implying a threat of litigation. This was accompanied by a more explicit threat: that several high-profile Black Studies professors at Harvard—including their chairman, Henry Louis Gates, Jr.—would decamp to Princeton if President Summers persisted in his quest for some improvement in academic standards. Princeton, for its part, hastened to announce its eagerness to welcome not only the academically challenged Professor West, who had formerly taught at Princeton, but

also his Harvard cohorts in its Black Studies department. What was there to misunderstand in this clear-cut scenario of challenge and response? The "stars" issued their ultimatum, and the president of Harvard surrendered.

It is not to be doubted, however, that President Summers's criticism came as a great shock to Professor West. After all, under the previous president, the inexhaustibly complaisant Neil Rudinstine, the entire Black Studies boondoggle at Harvard had been given what might be called *carte noire* to redefine the very concept of academic achievement along strictly racist lines, and not only in the realm of scholarly research but in classroom teaching as well. Hence the runaway grade inflation that was another of the issues raised by President Summers in his meeting with Professor West.

It was inevitable, moreover, that once a policy of "affirmative action" was established to govern the admission of students and the hiring of faculty at Harvard the same racially determined criteria would have to be applied to the content of the courses to be studied. For what is "affirmative action" if not the liberal euphemism for the legitimatizing of racial discrimination in favor of "minorities"? The result has been a selective ghettoization of the cur-

riculum, with Black Studies accorded not just a separatist program of study but also a separatist standard of achievement for both faculty and students. In other words, academic apartheid.

All parties to the dispute are, of course, in categorical denial of this disagreeable reality, yet this is what the controversy at Harvard has really been about from the outset, and it is the sheerest moral hypocrisy for either President Summers or Professor West or for any of their respective supporters in the academy and in the press to pretend otherwise. What is now crucial for the rest of us to understand, however, is the shameful historical process—a process of political blackmail—that has led to the current debacle, not only at Harvard and Princeton but also throughout the liberal academic world in this country.

When *The New Criterion* addressed this issue back in September 1993, it was in an essay by Terry Teachout occasioned by the publication of *Black Studies, Rap, and the Academy* by Houston A. Baker, Jr., the director of the Center for the Study of Black Literature and Culture at the University of Pennsylvania and a professor of English and the Albert M. Greenfield Professor of Human Relations. Mr. Teachout's entire essay is eminently worth rereading in the light of the current controversy, but we shall cite here only two short quotations that strike us as especially relevant. The first is about the role of rap in Black Studies programs.

The argument of *Black Studies, Rap, and the Academy* can be summed up briefly: (1) Black Studies is an indispensable part of American higher education. (2) Rap is a creative and authentic expression of the urban black experience and should be taken seriously by academics, particularly those in the field of black studies. (3) Anyone who disagrees with (1) or (2) is a racist.

It is important to recall, in this connection,

that in lieu of any recent scholarship, Professor West has himself produced a rap CD.

The second quotation is in a passage cited by Mr. Teachout from an article by James Traub in *The New Yorker*.

Black students at campuses all over the country began by demanding separate programs and living facilities; above all, they demanded the establishment of programs of black studies—in effect, a department of their own. For many scholars, black and white, such ultimatums represented an assault on the intellectual integrity of the university. But college officials found that a black-studies department was a relatively cheap way to buy campus peace. The Marxist historian Eugene Genovese accused these administrators of practicing “a benevolent paternalism that is neither more or less than racist.” The subsequent neglect of conventional academic standards in many black-studies departments suggests that Genovese was right.

That “relatively cheap way to buy campus peace” has proved very costly, as Harvard University has now belatedly discovered.

Repealing history

What happened at Harvard between Cornel West and Larry Summers is a perfect illustration of political correctness in action. You begin with two things: a lie and a political program. Mix carefully in an atmosphere of self-righteousness and, presto! You get the topsy-turvy world of euphemistic doublespeak in which truth is always negotiable and emotional blackmail triumphs with impunity.

It is sometimes thought that facts are sturdier things than ideas and theories. The history of tyranny shows that this is not the case. The empirical world of factual reality is far more susceptible to the onslaughts of

power than the mental world we populate with ideas. As the philosopher Hannah Arendt observed,

facts and events are infinitely more fragile things than axioms, discoveries, theories. . . . Perhaps the chances that Euclidean mathematics or Einstein's theory of relativity . . . would have been reproduced in time if their authors had been prevented from handing them down to posterity are not very good either, yet they are infinitely better than the chances that a fact of importance, forgotten or, more likely, lied away, will one day be rediscovered.

The real malignity of political correctness lies not in its ideals—which tend to involve little more than current clichés and slogans—but in its readiness to betray the lineaments of factual reality for political gain. “Who controls the past,” George Orwell wrote in 1984, “controls the future: who controls the present controls the past.” Or, as Mark Steyn puts it below in his contribution to our series on the survival of culture, “We are the accumulations of our past, in its wisdom and folly, and to repudiate it is a totalitarian act.”

Such repudiations can be large or small. Mr. Steyn cites Pol Pot's declaration of Year Zero when he inaugurated his murderous regime. (Robespierre, of course, tried something similar with his Thermidors and Brumaires.) But the totalitarian impulse is also at work in more modest actions. Consider the devoted Stalinist saying to himself as he airbrushes Trotsky out of a photograph: “What does this little lie matter? I am serving history and the imperatives of Communist brotherhood.”

We imagine a similar thought crossed the minds of those responsible for commissioning the nineteen-foot bronze sculpture that was supposed to be placed in front of the New York Fire Department's Brooklyn headquarters this spring. Meant to commemorate the 343 firemen killed in the terrorist attacks of September 11, the sculpture is based on the famous news photograph,

by Tom Franklin of the Bergen County *Record*, of three firemen raising an American flag on a pile of rubble at Ground Zero. Probably all of our readers remember that photograph, taken the very afternoon of the attacks, in which firemen Dan McWilliams, George Johnson, and Billy Eisengrein are seen hoisting Old Glory on a length of metal wreckage.

It is worth recording the names of those brave men, because, if the forces of political correctness had had their way, their deed would have been airbrushed into the amnesiac limbo of ideological expediency. Like the vast majority of firefighters in New York, McWilliams, Johnson, and Eisengrein happen to be white. How to deal with that politically incorrect fact in this age of “affirmative action”? Simple: alter the historical record. Thus the model for the sculpture depicts not the three white firemen but a rainbow coalition of one white, one black, and one Hispanic man. Just as we were going to press, the news came down that the public outcry against this effort to rewrite history had led the sponsors to drop plans for the sculpture: splendid if true.

A spokesman for a group representing black firemen emitted the usual PC-speak about the sculpture: “The symbolism is far more important than representing the actual people,” he said. “I think the artistic expression of diversity would supersede any concern over factual correctness.” Ah, yes, good old “factual correctness.” It is an extraordinary development that the mantra of “diversity” has become a favored tool of historical falsification. We agree with the firefighter who noted that it was “an insult to those three guys to put imaginary faces on that statue.” But the insult encompasses more than Messrs. McWilliams, Johnson, and Eisengrein. It is an insult to the truth. Carlo Casoria, who lost his firefighter son in the attack, put it with blunt accuracy: “They're rewriting history in order to achieve political correctness.” In other words, so long, Trotsky.

The survival of culture: VI

The slyer virus: the West's anti-Westernism

by Mark Steyn

*For I dipt into the future, far as human eye could see,
Saw the Vision of the world, and all the wonder that would be;
Saw the heavens fill with commerce, argosies of magic sails,
Pilots of the purple twilight dropping down with costly bales;
Heard the heavens fill with shouting, and there rain'd a ghastly dew
From the nations' airy navies grappling in the central blue;
Far along the world-wide whisper of the south-wind rushing warm,
With the standards of the peoples plunging thro' the thunder-storm;
Till the war-drum throbb'd no longer, and the battle-flags were furl'd
In the Parliament of man, the Federation of the world.
There the common sense of most shall hold a fretful realm in awe,
And the kindly earth shall slumber, lapt in universal law.
—Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "Locksley Hall" (1842)*

In the first week of September 2001, the kindly earth, lapt in universal law, was gathered in South Africa, yakking incessantly, shrieking hysterically, but slumbering nonetheless. In a novel or a movie, it would have seemed too pat, the juxtaposition too obvious. But real life is not so squeamish as the professional scenarist, and so the week-end of September 8, 2001 found the representatives of the civilized world locked in intense negotiations with the planet's pre-eminent thugs over what recompense the West should make for its evil legacy.

Underneath the surface controversy, the United Nations Conference Against Racism, Racial Intolerance, Xenophobia and/or Related Intolerance in Durban had an

impressive unanimity on the key points. Everyone agreed that the West was guilty as charged, disagreement being confined only to the appropriate remedy. Dismissing apologies for colonialism and slavery as a pathetic attempt to cop a plea, Robert Mugabe's government—taking time out of its hectic schedule of terrorizing white farmers—called on Britain and America to “apologize unreservedly for their crimes against humanity.” There was a big split on the slavery-reparations front between the African-American bloviators, who wanted whitey's payments to go to individuals, and the African presidents, who thought it would be more convenient if the West just dropped off one big check at the presiden-

tial palace. The Organization for African Unity demanded that reparations for the Hutu slaughter of the Tutsis should be paid—by the Americans.

But the jingling of the guinea helps the hurt
that Honour feels,
And the nations do but murmur.

Instead of slapping their knees and weeping with laughter and wondering how the after-conference cabaret was ever going to top this, the Europeans and North Americans were at pains to agree with their chastisers. The British, French, Dutch, Italians, Spanish, Germans, and Portuguese were happy to concede European colonialism was wrong, but unhappy at having their case formally presented by the Belgians as current holders of the EU's rotating presidency. Having been remarkably inept and corrupt imperialists, the Belgians understandably find consolation in the leftist theory that the murkier bits of their history owe more to the general, inherent iniquities of colonialism rather than to their specific failure to be any good at it. Prostrate as they were, their European colleagues had enough residual rump professional imperialist pride to resent Brussels's willingness to overegg the self-abasement pudding.

Otherwise, the West's current leaders—Britain's Tony Blair, France's Lionel Jospin, Canada's Jean Chrétien, et al.—side with their tormentors on the sins of their fathers, but feel that, as impeccable multiculturalists, they themselves should be cut some slack. Mr. Chrétien was all for the conference shining a useful spotlight on the most wicked racist sexist societies on earth but was a bit taken back to find that the first country caught in the beam was his own. Matthew Coon Come, chief of Canada's "First Nations," told UN delegates that he and his fellow natives were victims of a "racist and colonial syndrome of dispossession and discrimination" and only last year had been savagely attacked by "white mobs" acting on the behest of the government in Ottawa. The crowd applauded wildly.

Needless to say, the Canadian government had paid for Mr. Coon Come to fly to Durban to explain how oppressive it is. In Britain, your average Tory backbencher likes to spend his lunch hours hanging upside down in a bondage dungeon being flayed by Miss Whiplash for fifteen quid plus a small tip. Enlightened opinion has, as in so many other areas, "Federalized" this important adjunct to government. Mr. Coon Come provides essentially the same service as Miss Whiplash, though at rather greater cost. The United States, though it's spent years being damned by *biens-pensants* for refusing to pay its UN dues, was happy to pony up 25 percent of the tab for Durban.

*If we are as ashamed as we
insist we are—of ourselves, our
culture and our history—then
inevitably we will invite our
own destruction.*

And it was cheap at the price. As the conference bogged down in the precise degree and number of anti-Israeli slurs the final communiqué could accommodate ("Okay, you can have two 'racist Zionist murderers' but take out the 'Jew bloodsuckers'"), the chancelleries of the West devoted most of their attention to calibrating the status of their emissaries, like a dowager duchess obsessing over placement at dinner. Though many nations were represented at the highest level—"Today the Presidents of Nigeria, Latvia, Togo, and Cuba, among others, addressed delegates on the topics of racism, slavery, and reparations," reported *The New York Times* without giggling—some European nations downgraded their delegations to "mid-level." Canada toyed with downgrading from "mid-level" to "low-level," but eventually decided against it: the low-level diplomat is the gunboat of modern international relations and not to be deployed lightly.

The United States, for its part, downgraded from low-level to complete with-

drawal, much to the regret of other delegates such as the Reverend Jesse Jackson, President-for-Life of the People's Republic of Himself. According to Jesse and Co., only by remaining at the table can we "influence the debate." Take the Syrian Foreign Minister, whose position is that the Holocaust is "a Jewish lie." Okay, we can probably never get him to accept that six million Jews were murdered but, if we'd joined the Norwegian delegation in all-night negotiations, we might have been able to persuade Damascus to accept a compromise position acknowledging that, oh, eight or nine hundred may have died, mostly troublemakers who were asking for it. This would represent what the Rev. Jackson, the UN bigwigs, and Norway call "progress."

Fortunately, it wasn't all negative. The delegates came up with a delicious new term for advanced capitalism—"techno-racism"—and there was a rapturous ovation for Fidel Castro, who was introduced as the leader of "the most democratic country in the world." Late on the Saturday, the UN's Mary Robinson declared the Conference a grand success and everyone went home. A little over forty-eight hours later, three hijacked airliners were flown into the Pentagon and the World Trade Center.

The left were the first to draw the connection between the UN Conference and Ground Zero, even before the dust had settled. What happened, said various professional grievance-mongers, was a reaction to America's decision to walk out in Durban. It then emerged that the nineteen wealthy Arabs, mostly Saudi, had been planning their attack for years, while living openly in the United States and other Western societies.

But, of course, in broader terms the left is correct: Durban leads inevitably to the rubble of lower Manhattan. If we are as ashamed as we insist we are—of ourselves, our culture and our history—then inevitably we will invite our own destruction. If Western civilization is really something to apol-

ogize for, then surely the sooner all our cities are flattened the better it will be for the world. In that sense, aside from anything else, September 11, 2001 was a call to moral seriousness. We know now what is at stake.

For many starry-eyed Western progressives, the Afro-Marxist economic illiterate is the latterday version of Rousseau's noble savage, his very inability to master the rudiments of competent public administration a triumphant confirmation of his cultural integrity.

Around the world, there are certain societies that function and those that don't. The ones that work have certain things in common. The ones that don't reject some or all of those features, disdaining explicitly the rule of law, property rights, free expression, and representative government, thereby additionally depressing economic activity, technological innovation, foreign investment, education, and the arts. For the people running these loser states, this grim soiled laundry list is necessary to maintain the regime. For those observing from the West, it is in the nature of multicultural man, generous to a fault, to regard these aberrations as just another "alternative lifestyle"—lesbianism, vegetarianism, totalitarianism, whatever. I recall the Duke of Edinburgh being lectured by some or other African President-for-Life, explaining how his country had learned from the mistakes of the British: having a lot of different parties simply meant you wasted too much time arguing with each other. Under his nation's evolved form of democracy, lots of different views were still allowed, but now they were brought together within one party, which was much more effective. How seductive it sounds: for many starry-eyed

Western progressives, the Afro-Marxist economic illiterate is the latterday version of Rousseau's noble savage, his very inability to master the rudiments of competent public administration a triumphant confirmation of his cultural integrity. For the real-politik crowd, it's all you can expect from these countries. And, for a vast mass of others in between, Tennyson's "Parliament of man" and "Federation of the world" are so worthy in and of themselves, such a restrained vision of an attainable Utopia, "the common sense of most," that we are willing to pretend the Foreign Minister of Syria is no different from the Foreign Minister of Luxemburg or New Zealand. If this polite fiction was ever worth observing, it is so no longer.

The good news was that, in the immediate aftermath of September 11, it quickly became clear that there was no serious antiwar movement—just a few aging Ivy League slogan-parroters whose tired tropes failed to spark even on campus. Noam Chomsky will never be a threat to anyone because, when he warns that the Pentagon programs are being "implemented on the assumption that they may lead to the death of several million people in the next couple of weeks," he's being too self-evidently ridiculous for all but his most gullible patrons. Week after week, poll after poll showed that those opposed to the war numbered no more than 5 percent. True, they were overwhelmingly concentrated in our most prestigious institutions—Berkeley, National Public Radio—but the inability of the elites to rouse the masses to their tattered banner speaks well for Tennyson's "common sense of most," at least in the United States. Not for the first time, one appreciates the importance of the popular will as a brake on the inclinations of the elite.

This is one of the great strengths of . . . well, not democracy per se, but of our culture and its particular kind of political temperament. In the Middle East, the nominally pro-American sewer regimes sell themselves to the state department on the

basis that they're a restraint on the loonier inclinations of their people. And there's a measure of truth in that. Insofar as public opinion can be determined in the Arab world it seems that the majority believe that it was Mossad that destroyed the World Trade Center. "Only the Jews are capable of planning such an incident," Imam Muhammad al-Gamei'a said, "because it was planned with great precision of which Osama bin Laden or any other Islamic organization or intelligence apparatus is incapable." This sounds like what the Great Satan's grade-school teachers might call a self-esteem issue: we Muslims just aren't smart enough to pull off a Jew stunt like this.

If you talk to the French, the fact that America had Prohibition seems far more bizarre to them than that Italy had Fascism; it's apparently more irrational to have a Communist scare (America) than Communism (East Germany).

Not so, say 30 percent of Greeks. It was the American government that destroyed the World Trade Center, *because* they were looking for an excuse to invade *Afghanistan*! Of course! Washington was just waiting for an opportunity to seize a country uniquely blessed in supplies of premium-grade rubble.

The Greeks! The font of our civilization! Evidently, it'll take a lot more than the British Museum returning Lord Elgin's plunder to get them their marbles back. But we forget that Greece, like Spain and Portugal, was a dictatorship a quarter-century ago. When Americans look back on the Seventies, it means Jimmy Carter, the Partridge Family, flared pants. In Southern Europe, it means Franco, Salazar, and the Colonels. The exceptionalism of the Ameri-

can experience can be measured against not just Cuba, Rwanda, and Iraq, but also Greece and Austria and France. Continentals, for their part, are happy to acknowledge America as an aberration, though in their own snide way: if you talk to the French, for example, the fact that America had Prohibition seems far more bizarre to them than that Italy had Fascism; it's apparently more irrational to have a Communist scare (America) than Communism (East Germany).

In 1999, Thomas Friedman of *The New York Times* unveiled his "Golden Arches" theory of history—that no two countries in which McDonald's operated had ever gone to war with each other. A few weeks later, NATO began bombing Belgrade, though narrowly missing the local McDonald's franchise. Friedman's thesis is insufficient: today, Europeans eat Big Macs and listen to Britney Spears, just as a century ago Americans listened to Caruso and flocked to *The Merry Widow*. Or to put it more bluntly: even under the Taliban, the Afghans played cricket. But a common taste isn't the same as a common culture, as Friedman should have known. Given the choice between its booming westernized economy or a blood-soaked wasteland, Yugoslavia eagerly chose the latter. The critical soundtrack is not Britney, but the deeper rhythms of the culture playing underneath.

The rest of the world is reluctant to acknowledge this. Mr. Mugabe says Britain is to blame for Zimbabwe. The Arabs say America is to blame for the Middle East. And Britain and America don't disagree, not really. The Durban Syndrome—the vague sense that the West's success must somehow be responsible for the rest's failure—is a far slyer virus than the toxic effusions of the Chomsky-Sontag set, and it has seeped far deeper into the cultural bloodstream.

At its most benign, Durban Syndrome manifests itself in a desire not to offend others if one can offend one's own instead. We saw this after September 11 in the incessant exhortations from government, public service announcements, the nation's pastors

and vicars, etc., that the American people should resist their natural appetite for pogroms and refrain from brutalizing Muslims. Ninety-nine-point-nine-nine-nine percent of Americans had no intention of brutalizing Muslims but they were sporting enough to put up with being characterized as a bunch of knuckledragging swamp-dwellers, understanding that diversity means not just being sensitive to other peoples but also not being too sensitive about yourself. Similarly, at airports across the continent, eighty-seven-year-old grannies waited patiently as their hairpins were confiscated and their bloomers emptied out on the conveyor belt, implicitly accepting this as a ritual of the multicultural society: to demonstrate that we eschew "racial profiling," we go out of our way to look for people who don't look anything like the people we're looking for.

This is what we're fighting for—the right not to tolerate any intolerance of our tolerance. As Keith Windschuttle pointed out last month in these pages, Silvio Berlusconi, the almost implausibly pro-American media magnate currently serving as Italy's prime minister, wandered deplorably off-message when he suggested that "we must be aware of the superiority of our civilization, a system that has guaranteed well-being, respect for human rights and—in contrast with Islamic countries—respect for religious and political rights, a system that has as its values understandings of diversity and tolerance." Poor old Berlusconi found himself scorned as a pariah by his chums in the EU, though no one seemed able to single out anything in his statement that was not, in fact, true. Nevertheless, the Belgian Prime Minister apologized profusely to Islam and promised to send the guy for sensitivity training. Despite including the multiculti buzz-words of "diversity" and "tolerance," Berlusconi had made the mistake of assuming said diversity and tolerance derived in some way from our Western heritage. Best to keep it simple: our tolerance derives from our diversity, our diversity from our tolerance, that is all ye

know and all ye need to know. And so Her Majesty's viceroy, the Rt. Hon. Adrienne Clarkson, Governor-General and Commander-in-Chief of Canada, stood on the deck of HMCS *Preserver* a few weeks after September 11 and told her forces, as they set sail for the Gulf, that they were fighting not for queen and country—perish the thought—but for “tolerance” and “multiculturalism.”

As it turns out, even these virtues may be somewhat *vieux chapeau*. Helena Kennedy is a leftwing thinker, celebrity lawyer, and Chair of the British Council who goes under the stagename Baroness Kennedy of the Shaws, QC. Promoting a forthcoming lecture called “Cultural Conundrums in the Brave New World,” Lady Kennedy opined that it was too easy to go on about “Islamic fundamentalists.” “What I think happens very readily,” she said, “is that we as Western liberals too often are fundamentalist ourselves. We don't look at our own fundamentalisms.” Her interviewer asked what exactly she meant by Western liberal fundamentalism. “One of the things that we are too ready to insist upon,” replied Lady Kennedy, “is that we are the tolerant people and that the intolerance is something that belongs to other countries like Islam. And I'm not sure that's true.”

If Lady Kennedy is saying that we're too tolerant of our own tolerance, she might be on to something: there is something a little preposterous about a world in which the Western politician's first reaction to the slaughter of thousands by Islamic fundamentalists is to buzz his secretary and demand she find him a mosque to visit so he can demonstrate his respect for Islam. But in fact Lady Kennedy seems to be saying that our tolerance of our own claims to tolerance is making us intolerant of other people's intolerance: when we moan about Islamic fundamentalism, we forget how offensive our own fundamentalisms—votes, human rights, drivers' licenses for women—must be to others. The baroness says we're too tolerant of ourselves, and she'll tolerate anything but that.

The British Council was founded to promote British culture around the world, but that was then and this is now. Today, explained Lady Kennedy, it's all about “mutuality—an exchange without anybody saying which set of values is more important.” In the multicultural West, our values are that we have no values: we accord all values equal value—the wittering English feminist concerned that her tolerance is implicitly intolerant or the Sudanese wife-beater and compulsory clitorrectomy scheduler. That's why Lady Kennedy likes “globalization.” It gives her “warm feelings that are about sharing,” she said. “I feel often when I meet with women, you know, from other parts of the world a shared sense of, somehow an experience of . . . of . . . womanhood.”

In Japan after the war, the Americans were insistent that Emperor Hirohito cut out all that nutty stuff about being a direct descendant of the sun goddess. But it's no more irrational than our determination to pretend that a group of Anglo-Celtic settlers who'd been governing themselves for a century deliberately chose to adopt an Iroquois constitution.

Baroness Kennedy has got her priorities right. I am woman, hear me roar! Say it loud, I'm black and proud! We're here, we're queer, get used to it! The one identity we're not encouraged to trumpet is the one that enables us to trumpet all the others: our identity as citizens of a very particular kind of society, built on the rule of law, property rights, freedom of expression, and the universal franchise. I am Western, hear me apologize! Say it loud, I'm Canadian

and cowed! We're Brits, we're shits, awf'ly sorry about that!

As an example of how formalized this routine now is, consider the Congressional Resolution that came before the House of Representatives a couple of months after 9/11. On the face of it, it was an unexceptional measure to inaugurate "Native American Month." But, along with various unobjectionable platitudes, it included the observation that "Native American governments developed the fundamental principles of freedom of speech and separation of powers in government, and these principles form the foundation of the United States Government today."

This is a reference to the Iroquois Confederation, which, according to the multiculturalists, America's Founding Fathers used as the blueprint for the U.S. Constitution. It's not just that the white man stole the red man's land but his very system of government, too. To call this a revisionist theory would be to credit it with a degree of scholarship. There's not the slightest evidence that consideration of how any particular group of Indians governed themselves had any bearing on how the American colonists wished to govern themselves—nor, come to that, that the Indians in question even formulated for themselves any such "separation of powers." The principal Indian contribution to the founding of the American Republic was, sad to say, getting whupped in the French and Indian Wars. The New England colonists who fought under Lord Amherst stood in Montreal on September 8, 1760 and watched the French flag come down the flagpole and half a continent change hands; they returned to their towns with a new sense of themselves and their potential. In Japan after the war, the Americans were insistent that Emperor Hirohito cut out all that nutty stuff about being a direct descendant of the sun goddess. But it's no more irrational than our determination to pretend that a group of Anglo-Celtic settlers who'd been governing themselves for a century deliberately chose to adopt an Iroquois constitution.

The republic's founders were, I'm afraid, British subjects animated by certain eighteenth-century English theories about liberty, themselves deriving from the principles of common law and Magna Carta. It is not "Eurocentric" to make such an obvious point. Indeed, "Europe" was noticeably antipathetic to these ideas and in many ways still is. That's why, while America still has only the same yellowing parchment it started out with two centuries ago, the continent has lurched through its Third Reichs and Fourth Republics and wholesale constitutional rewrites every generation. The U.S. Constitution is not only older than the French, German, Italian, Belgian, Greek, and Spanish constitutions, it's older than all of them put together. The ideas of a relatively small group of Englishmen on the rule of law and responsible government have been responsible for centuries of sustained peaceful constitutional evolution in America, Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, India, Barbados, Mauritius. True, of those Englishmen, America got the exceptional talents, as is clear from a casual comparison of *The Federalist Papers* and an equivalent opus called Canada's Founding Debates. But generally, around the world, the likelihood of living your life unmolested by the arbitrary cruelties of government is inversely proportional to how far the state departs from Anglo-American theories of liberty.

This is not an argument about "Englishness," whatever that is. I doubt whether more than one in a thousand Americans could name England's "national day"—St. George's Day is unobserved even in dear old Blighty—and certainly no New Yorker has ever seen an English parade wending its way up Fifth Avenue in national dress. English nationalism is very nearly an oxymoron (at least anywhere outside the soccer terraces): the English have traditionally preferred to submerge their own ethnic identity within larger forces, inventing Britishness as a means to make the Scots, Irish, and Welsh feel more at home—and eventually the Indians, Basutos, and Fijians,

too. By the late 1940s, a quarter of the world's population were "British subjects" and, formally, no distinction was made between a Londoner and a Malay. "*Civis Britannicus sum*," as Lee Kuan Yew, the former Prime Minister of Singapore, likes to say, not entirely tongue in cheek. American and British nationality were the first non-ethnic citizenships of the modern world, a concept other countries have adopted only recently and reluctantly: until a few years ago, third-generation Turkish workers in Germany were unable to become citizens.

Every revolution—France's, Russia's, even Iran's—claims to be exportable, but some values seem more universally applicable than others. That's why the framework that the Founding Fathers devised to unite a baker's dozen of small homogeneous colonies on the Atlantic coast proved strong enough to expand across a continent and halfway round the globe to Hawaii. That's why the British have successfully exported Westminster constitutions to Belize, Papua New Guinea, and India, the world's largest democracy, mainly Hindu but with a minority population of 150 million Muslims (that's some minority) who to their credit have no interest in the fetid swamp of militant Islamism in which so many of their co-religionists elsewhere are festering. Of the world's fifty most free nations, half were once ruled by Britain. That's the sort of thing most countries would boast about, not teach in schools as a shameful legacy of oppression.

That said, this is not an argument in favor of the "Anglosphere," a concept much promoted by John O'Sullivan and others but which these days is confined mainly to the battlefield. The "Partnership of Nations," as America and its allies were billed in Afghanistan, consisted on the ground of the United States plus the British, Australian, and New Zealand SAS (special forces commandos) and somewhere a little further back Canada's JTF2 (being semi-French, Canada is a semi-detached member of the Anglosphere). All these states are British-

derived and, on the face of it, suggest a working version of Winston Churchill's dream of a grand reconciliation between the United States and the British Empire in some new configuration. But these days what these countries share is a common culture that, officially, recoils from the idea that they have a common culture. We're multiculturalists now, and the salient point about multiculturalism is that it's a unicultural phenomenon, existing almost entirely in the Anglo-American world.

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Young Britons, we're told by Tony Blair and the other Europhiles, now think of themselves as European—they eat pasta, they drink Perrier, they like nothing better than to curl up with a good EU harmonization directive on the permitted curvature of bananas, they wear regulation Euro-condoms, etc.

Similarly, Australians, according to *their* new orthodoxy, think of themselves as Asians. This was the essence of the republican case in the 1999 referendum on the monarchy: it was inappropriate to have an English queen presiding over a country with so many Vietnamese restaurants. As it transpired, not all Australians were up to speed on the new orthodoxy and on refer-

endum day Her Majesty won handily. Australians, the republicans assured us, wanted an elected head of state. Now they've got one. To paraphrase Tony Blair, she is the people's queen now.

Canadians, meanwhile, think of themselves as . . . well, they've yet to come up with a word for it, but it sure as hell isn't "British" or "American." In the last thirty years, no other country has worked so hard to upturn the realities of both history and geography.

And in America, Congress now wants us to believe that the U.S. Constitution is based on that of the Iroquois Confederation, but with "Iroquois" whited-out and "United States of America" scribbled on top by Ben Franklin. The Congressional Resolution is an unusually literal confirmation of a general rule: these days the surest sign that you share the Britannic inheritance is your willingness to reject it.

Since September 11, "the survival of culture" has been not just a theoretical proposition. Though the demolition of the Twin Towers was seen as an assault on Western modernity—on skyscrapers, Wall Street, jet travel—Islamofascism is no friend to Eastern antiquity, either. A few months earlier, the Taliban cheerfully blew to smithereens the great stone Buddhas that had loomed over some of the world's earliest trade routes for two millennia. Multiculturalism was invented to make amends for "cultural imperialism," for the idea that the West in taking its ideas to the world had somehow obliterated all the other cultures out there. But this couldn't be further from the truth.

Relaxed about its own middlebrow contributions—Wodehouse, Gilbert & Sullivan—English culture has been fascinated with the glories of the past. No other civilization has gone to such extraordinary lengths to reconstruct its predecessors—sending out professors to scramble in the dust for the pharaohs' tombs; reconstructing baroque instruments so that the music of the period can be heard as it sounded at the time; building an amphitheater in the

English countryside so that schoolchildren can enjoy Euripides and Sophocles—in the original Greek. Much of what survives from the ancient world would have been lost forever without our respect for the past as the building blocks of our own culture. As it happens, willful cultural vandalism is more characteristic of the new age: crucifixes in urine, dung-smearing madonnas, yawn, yawn, been there, done that. Had some waggish Taliban scooped up the rubble from those Buddhas and entered it for Britain's Turner Prize, I've no doubt it would have won and been hailed by the judges for the way it wittily deconstructs traditional notions of religious iconography.

And, while it's not as dramatic as blowing statues sky-high, when Congress is willing to collude in a fiction about the foundation of America's institutions, it's embarking on the same process, removing some of those building blocks from our civilization. Once begun, selective demolition is hard to control. Until relatively recently in Canada, many natives went to "residential schools" run by the Christian churches on behalf of the federal government. They learned the same things children learned in other schools: there was a map on the wall showing a quarter of the globe colored red for the Queen-Empress's realms; there was Shakespeare and Robert Louis Stevenson, and "Dr. Livingstone, I presume"; there was not a lot about the Iroquois Confederation. No doubt, as in any other school system, there were a number of randy teachers and sadistic brutes.

In the Nineties, a few middle-aged alumni came forward to claim they'd been "abused" while at the residential schools. How did the churches react? Here is Archbishop Michael Peers, the Anglican Primate of Canada, making his first public statement on the matter in 1993: "I am sorry, more sorry than I can say," he said, "that in our schools so many were abused physically, sexually, culturally, emotionally."

At that point, there was not one whit of evidence that there was any widespread, systemic physical or sexual abuse in the

residential schools. There is still none. But His Grace had lapsed reflexively into a tone that will be all too familiar to anybody who's attended an Anglican service anywhere outside of Africa or the Pacific isles in the last thirty years. In the Sixties, "Peter Simple," the great satirist whose work appears in *The Daily Telegraph*, invented a character called Dr. Spacely Trellis, the "go-ahead Bishop of Bevindon," whose every sermon on the social issues of the day reached a climax with the words, "We are all guilty!" Riddled with self-doubt and an enthusiastic pioneer of the peculiar masochism that now afflicts the West, the Anglican Church has for years enjoyed the strange frisson of moral superiority that comes from blanket advertising of one's own failures. It was surely only a matter of time before some litigious types took them at their own estimation.

So, in the wake of Archbishop Peers's sweeping declaration of his own guilt, more victims spoke up—dozens, hundreds, totaling eventually some 15,000 "survivors" with some 5000 claims of damages. Though none has yet been tested in a court of law, by 1999 the costs merely of responding to the charges were threatening to bankrupt not just several Protestant and Catholic dioceses but the entirety of both churches throughout Canada. Yet still the clergymen felt it would be bad form to defend themselves. A United Church of Canada employee, John Siebert, spent six years researching the history of residential schools and their impact on native culture and pointed out several helpful facts:

- Native children were not forced to abandon their own beliefs and become Christians; in 1871, before the first residential school ever opened, 96 percent of Canada's Indians identified themselves as either Anglican or Catholic.
- When, over the years, the Federal Government and the churches wanted to close residential schools, it was the Indian bands (the tribal councils) that wanted to keep them open.

- . . . ah, but there's no point even going on. The defendants weren't looking for a defence, only a way to plea-bargain themselves into oblivion.

So Mr. Seibert's former employers at the UCC wrote to the papers, indignantly dissociating themselves from his position, facts notwithstanding: "It is the position of the United Church that the national residential schools system was an integral part of a national policy intended to assimilate First Nations people into the dominant Euro-Canadian culture," they said. "There are simply too many stories of the pain and cultural loss experienced by survivors of the residential schools system to conclude that this policy and its expression in the residential schools system represents anything but a profound failure in the history of the relationship between First Nations and non-First Nations peoples." With defendants like this, who needs plaintiffs? The Canadian Government, a co-defendant, prepared for an optimistically-priced out-of-court settlement of some \$2 billion, split between 15,000 "survivors" of "crimes" never recognized by any court.

We are the accumulations of our past, in its wisdom and folly, and to repudiate it is a totalitarian act, never more explicitly captured than in Pol Pot's proclamation of "Year Zero."

Nonetheless, "pain and cultural loss" are categories worth separating. Is it possible even the horniest vicars could sodomize 15,000 kids? Well, no. Ninety percent of claims are for the vaguer offence of "cultural genocide," a crime we'll be hearing a lot more of in the future. "Cultural genocide" is similar to traditional forms of genocide—such as being herded into ovens or hacked to pieces with machetes—but with the hap-

py benefit, from the plaintiffs' point of view, that you personally don't have to be killed in order to have a case. All you need are blurry accusations, historical resentments, and a hefty dose of false-memory syndrome. Against craven clerics like the Anglican Church, that's more than enough.

"Follow me," said Christ, "and I will make you fishers of men." But that's a tad strong, isn't it? Much easier to concede that, yes, doing the Lord's work for over a century is, indeed, cultural genocide, and the only question is whether our victims will accept a postdated check. Residential schools did not forcibly "convert" their charges, most of whom had been Christians for several generations. There have been Christian Indians on this continent for four centuries. The first complete Bible published in North America was a 1663 translation into Algonquin, for the Indians around Boston and Roxbury. In a theological sense, the essentially temporal expression of Christian spirituality has for the most part been complementary to rather than a displacement of the fundamentally spatial nature of Indian spirituality. The Iroquois may not have drafted the U.S. Constitution but they could easily have written the King James Bible. But Archbishop Peers and his chums not only have no interest in being fishers of men, they're desperate to unhook and throw back many of those reeled in centuries ago, preferring to abandon them to the secular hell of identity-group welfare.

Onward, Christian soldiers, retreating into oblivion. As for "cultural genocide," if there's any going on these days, it's the genocide of the Britannic inheritance—in North America, in the Antipodes, in Blair's Britain. A couple of generations back, governments thought they were doing native children a favor by teaching them the English language, the principles of common law and Magna Carta, and the great sweep of imperial history—that by doing so they were bringing young Indians and Inuit "within the circle of civilized conditions," enabling them to become full participants in

the modern state. It's only half a century ago, but that's one memory the Government of Canada will never recover.

No civilized society legislates retrospectively: if you pass a seatbelt law in 1990, you don't prosecute people who were driving without them in 1980. Likewise, we should not sue the past for noncompliance with the orthodoxies of the present. We are the accumulations of our past, in its wisdom and folly, and to repudiate it is a totalitarian act, never more explicitly captured than in Pol Pot's proclamation of "Year Zero." The reason why the American Revolution succeeded and the French, Russian, and almost all others failed is precisely because it resisted the "Year Zero" approach. Today, though, almost every Anglo-American institution instinctively opts for Pol Pot Lite. The Anglican Primate of Canada is not saying he personally has done anything wrong, but is merely casually defaming the memory of generations of his predecessors. Tony Blair apologizes for the Irish potato famine, thereby slandering his predecessors, many of whom from Queen Victoria down acted with great compassion and generosity. And, as we know, Bill Clinton has for years has been too busy apologizing for the sins of his predecessors to apologize for any of his own: "I cannot tell a lie. My slave-owning predecessor George Washington did cut down that cherry tree."

And once their authentic culture has been discredited, the Anglosphere governments are happy to spend time and money inventing an entirely different one. A decade ago, to counterbalance their membership of the (British) Commonwealth, Canada prevailed upon France to set up a French version of the organization. The Quai d'Orsay, for its usual devious reasons, was happy to oblige. The "Francophonie" does everything the Commonwealth does but in French. Or rather it would do it in French if enough of its members knew how to speak it. The Commonwealth is made up of former colonies of Britain, bound by ties of language, legal system, or, if all else fails, cricket. But Paris gave the old globe a spin

and decided it didn't have enough former colonies, so the Francophonie was expanded to include nations that had a vague, unspecified connection with French. And not just nations. The Francophonie's members include Poland, the Czech Republic, Louisiana (really), and for all I know the express croissant shop at the Rockefeller Center subway station.

I can't speak for Louisiana, but otherwise many of the government leaders are of the genocidal strain. Real genocide, that is, not the "cultural" variety. I'm sure President Mutilata of Nogo enjoys his trips to Francophonie summits, even if the Champs Elysées Wal-Mart has a disappointing range of machetes. But it's hard to see what Canada gets out of it. Discussions on the perennial problem of human rights proceed according to ritual. The Swiss suggest holding an open press conference at which the demonstrators could make their case. Burundi then files a counter-motion suggesting the troublemakers should be clubbed and disembowelled and their genitals hung out on the balcony railings. Then, just when the summit seems hopelessly split from top to toe like a Tutsi villager, the Canadians draft an ingenious compromise proposing that they all leave quietly by the back door and return to their hotels for a quick shower and cocktail before the Acadian cultural gala. "Once again we see Canada acting as a force for good in its traditional role as honest broker," says the prime minister, and everybody goes home.

Comparing Quebec and Mauritius with Paris-administered territories such as Chad and Mali, you could make a compelling case that the best and least brutal guarantor of the French language and culture on the planet has been the British Crown. But the argument hardly seems worth the effort. The real question is why Canada feels it has to go to such expensive lengths as inventing a completely bogus international body to demonstrate its multicultural bonafides.

For the British, the European Union is scarcely less perverse. One day before Sep-

tember 11, the playwright Harold Pinter gave a speech at the University of Florence.

The chaps who run the EU, if not actively freedom-hating, certainly regard it as a frightful nuisance. The principle underpinning the EU is not "We, the people" but "We know better than the people."

After the usual stuff about America deliberately bombing civilian targets in Yugoslavia and rejecting Kyoto and the International Criminal Court and being "an authentic rogue state" and "the most dangerous power the world has ever known" and "a brutal and malignant world machine" that has to be "resisted," the great man tossed in a witicism that delighted his audience. A propos Mr. Bush's frequent references to "freedom-loving people," Pinter remarked, "I must say I would be fascinated to meet a freedom-hating people."

Actually, it's not that difficult. The chaps who run the EU, if not actively freedom-hating, certainly regard it as a frightful nuisance. The principle underpinning the EU is not "We, the people" but "We know better than the people"—not just on capital punishment and the single currency, but on pretty much anything that comes up. Not so long ago, Jean-Pierre Chevenement, then France's Defence Minister, insisted that the United States was dedicated to "the organized cretinization of our people." As a dismissal of American pop culture—Disney, MTV—this statement is not without its appeal, though it sounds better if you've never had the misfortune to sit through a week-end of continental television. But the reality is that no one is as dedicated to the proposition that the people are cretins as M. Chevenement and the panjandrums of the new "Europe." The EU is organized on this assumption. If, like the Danes and now the Irish, they're impertinent enough to tick

the wrong box in referenda on deeper European integration, we'll just keep re-asking and re-re-asking the question until they get it right. It's not really about left or right in the sense of political alternatives so much as a permanent European governing class with very tight rules of admission.

After September 11, Tony Blair declared he had a twin-track commitment—to Mr. Bush's war on terrorism and to deeper integration within the EU. But the two are irreconcilable. Had Osama bin Laden waited till 2005 to attack New York and Washington, Mr. Blair could not have dispatched his task force: he would be bound into a common European foreign and defence policy. Would the EU offer frontline troops to Mr. Bush? In the Gulf War, Belgium refused even to fulfill its pre-existing contracts to sell the British ammunition because they didn't wish to fall out with Saddam. There is a level of basic incompatibility here which the British persist in deluding themselves about. To London's Europhiles, Britain is obviously "part of" Europe. But, in the age of jet travel, cellphones, wire transfers, and the internet, we're less bound by physical proximity than ever. Yet Britain for the first time in history has chosen to be imprisoned by geography and to disconnect itself from its culture.

If the hope is that small-time African losers like Robert Mugabe will stop beating up on Britain, I fear Mr. Blair is likely to be disappointed. As long as we are ashamed of ourselves, there'll always be something to apologize for. Touring Africa in 1998, Bill Clinton began by saying sorry for America's role the Cold War. In what was described by aides as "a spur of the moment rumination," he said

Very often we dealt with countries in Africa and other parts of the world based more on how they stood in the struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union than how they stood in the struggle for their own people's aspirations to live up to the fullest of their God-given abilities.

Is that really what we did wrong in Africa? Isn't it the case that the only thing the West has to apologize for in the Cold War is that it was too indulgent of Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, and postcolonial Africa's other founding frauds and simply stood by as they beggared the continent with their uniquely virulent strain of tribal Marxism?

But, of course, on the president's tour or at the Durban Conference, that's the one item that's never on the agenda. If Cold Warriors and old-school imperialists and Anglican missionaries were to take a leaf of Mr. Clinton's book and apologize for things they had nothing to do with, they might try this line: We apologize not for inflicting Western values but for inflicting all the anti-Western values, all of which, paradoxically, are also Western. Until Islamic fundamentalism came along, all the noisiest anti-Western ideologies were developed in the West, again mostly in Anglo-America. (Capitalism itself, as the French Eurocrats used to lecture Mrs. Thatcher, is "an Anglo-Saxon fetish.") Whether you're a liberal democracy or a moribund dictatorship, you're operating to a Western template. Ever since Karl Marx sat in the Reading Room of the British Library writing *Das Kapital*, great Western thinkers have been obsessed with discovering the flaw in capitalism, a kind of negative Holy Grail for the knights of progressivism. For Marx, capitalism functioned only by exploiting the proletariat. But the proletariat got richer and bought homes in the suburbs. So the next generation of Marxists turned their attention to "colonialism": capitalism functioned only by looting the West's imperial possessions. But the West decolonized in the Fifties and Sixties, and they didn't get any poorer, only the colonies did. So the Marxists invented "neo-colonialism": capitalism functioned by informally exploiting the nominally independent developing world. But the dramatically differing rates at which developing economies developed in Asia, Africa, and Latin America seemed to have little to do with external forces and a lot more to do with obvious local factors.

By the time the UN met at Durban, the grievance-mongers were down to slavery: Europe and America had built their wealth on the slave trade. By this theory, the United Kingdom, which was first to abolish slavery—in the British Isles in 1772 and throughout the Empire in 1833—ought to be an economic basketcase, while the Sudan, Mali, Niger, Sierra Leone, Ghana, and the Ivory Coast, to name just a few of the countries in which slavery is currently practiced, ought to be rolling in dough. Instead, of course, large parts of the post-colonial world are more impoverished than they've ever been. Fifty years ago, Uganda was a net food exporter. Today, it can't feed itself. The average Egyptian earns less now than he did when the British left—that's not adjusted for inflation, but in real hard pounds.

Jesse Jackson and John Conyers have no interest in suing Mali for slavery reparations, because those poor chumps have a per-capita income of six-hundred bucks. Like all the rest of the West's anti-Western theorists, they don't dispute that capitalism works but only *why* it works. To those of us of a less pathological bent, it seems obvious that, rather than "exploiting" people, it invites citizens to exploit their own potential. Some will develop computer software and become billionaires (Bill Gates). Some will make a nice living as professional race-baiters and corporate shakedown artists (the Rev. Jackson). Some will clean up cranking out ridiculous theses for lucrative niche markets (Noam Chomsky), all the while bemoaning the system that keeps them in the style to which they have become accustomed. Only our society generates enough

cash to fund such a wide range of fatuities. Even Osama bin Laden owes his wealth to U.S. investment in Saudi Arabia. That the son of a spectacularly rich building contractor should have wound up literally digging himself his own personal hole in the ground in the Hindu Kush is in its way a poignant emblem of the Middle East's perverse misunderstanding of modernity.

This then is the paradox of the most successful culture in history: the "Anglo-Saxon fetish" and its attendant liberties have enabled more people to live their lives in freedom, health, and material comfort. Yet at the same time no other culture works so hard to deny its achievements and its heritage, to insist there must be a catch, there's gotta be an alternative. There isn't. The Anglophone culture has succeeded because it is in its way an anti-culture—a culture of individual rights, not collective rights or group rights (which the Euro-left have always been partial to) or identity politics (in which form collective rights have made a critical beachhead here). A "Federation of the World" is a nice fancy, but it will inevitably be a fretful, Durbanized, Jessefied world:

Knowledge comes, but wisdom lingers, and
I linger on the shore,
And the individual withers, and the world is
more and more.

Knowledge comes, but wisdom lingers, and
he bears a laden breast,
Full of sad experience, moving toward the
stillness of his rest.

George Santayana

by Roger Kimball

Human infirmity in moderating and checking the emotions I name bondage: for when a man is a prey to his emotions, he is not his own master, but lies at the mercy of fortune: so much so, that he is often compelled, while seeing that which is better for him, to follow that which is worse.

—Spinoza, *The Ethics*

“Aplomb in the midst of irrational things”—that’s my motto!

—Santayana to William Morton Fullerton, 1887

*It is poverty’s speech that seeks us out the most.
It is older than the oldest speech of Rome.
This is the tragic accent of the scene*

*And you—it is you that speak it, without speech,
The loftiest syllables among loftiest things,
The one invulnerable man among
Crude captains, . . .*

—Wallace Stevens, “To an Old Philosopher in Rome”

When John McCormick published *George Santayana: A Biography* in 1987, he began the introduction by registering his “bewilderment that so moving and powerful a figure, justifiably famous in his own day, should have been so unjustifiably neglected in ours.” McCormick noted with disgust that even *The Last Puritan* (1935)—Santayana’s one novel and probably his most famous work—had been “unavailable . . . for years.”

McCormick’s lament was understandable. There was a time when Santayana’s work was part of the normal furniture of educated discourse. Not only his semi-autobiographical novel, but also his poetry, essays, and wide-ranging philosophical writings were eagerly read and digested, flowering in turn in the sentiments and opinions of several generations of readers. At Harvard, Santayana’s official and unofficial students included Conrad Aiken, Robert Frost, T. S. Eliot, Witter Bynner, Walter Lippmann, Wallace Stevens, Scofield Thayer, Max Eastman, Van Wyck Brooks, Felix Frankfurter, and James B. Conant, many of whom (conspicuously excepting Eliot) registered their profound debt to his teaching. Until yesterday, it seems, Santayana’s influence was woven into the living tapestry of intellectual life. In our amnesiac day, Santayana’s influence seems to have been reduced to the literary equivalent of a geometric point: a single epigram, to wit, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” (Santayana is deliciously quotable, but his only other saying that has survived in wide currency is the admonition that “Fanaticism consists in redoubling your effort when you have forgotten your aim.”)

The years following publication of McCormick’s book have partly redressed his bewilderment about Santayana’s neglect—but not without irony. In 1986, after *George Santayana* was completed but before it was published, the MIT Press brought out *Per-*

sons and Places: Fragments of Autobiography, the fat first volume of its Critical Edition of *The Works of George Santayana*. *Persons and Places* was undeniably a good place to begin. Originally published in three volumes from 1944 to 1953 (the year after Santayana's death at eighty-eight), the book, like *The Last Puritan*, is among Santayana's most popular works. As its subtitle suggests, *Persons and Places* contains a good deal about Santayana's own life. It recounts his birth in Madrid in 1863 and early years in Avila with his father, his emigration, at eight, to Boston to live with his Scottish-born Catalan mother and her children by a previous marriage (to "a tall blond Puritan of aquiline features and perfect innocence of mind, George Sturgis of Boston"). Santayana takes the reader through his education at the Boston Public Latin School, Harvard, and in Germany, his relations with his family and peers, and his career as a philosophy professor at Harvard. Though in many ways a retiring personality, Santayana seemed to know almost everyone worth knowing, and so *Persons and Places* also contains any number of vivid character sketches: of Bertrand Russell and his brother John Francis, of Lady Ottoline Morrell and Siegfried Sassoon, of Logan Pearsall Smith, Bernard Berenson, and Robert Bridges. Santayana's splendid accuracy as a judge of character may be gleaned from his description of Lytton Strachey, whom he met in 1915: "a limp cadaverous creature," "like a caricature of Christ": "*Obscene* was the character written all over him."

Again like *The Last Puritan*, *Persons and Places* was a Book-of-the-Month Club selection, a fact that added greatly to its sales. And *Persons and Places* was a notable critical as well as popular success. Edmund Wilson, for example, searching for appropriate literary parallels, enthusiastically compared it to *The Education of Henry Adams*, Yeats's memoirs, and finally to Proust's great novel. Moreover, *Persons and Places*, coming late in Santayana's career, had not made it into the previous collection of his works, the hand-

some Triton Edition published in fifteen volumes by Scribners from 1936 to 1940. All of which is to say that everyone interested in Santayana had reason to welcome the republication of *Persons and Places*.

The irony mentioned above enters when one considers the MIT edition in the light of McCormick's complaint about the neglect of Santayana's work. During his life and after, Santayana was sometimes criticized for overwriting. He commanded immense fluency and could be tempted into gorgeous elaborateness. ("To some people," he complained, "my whole philosophy seems to be but rhetoric or prose poetry.") Although trained as a philosopher, Santayana was an intensely literary man; occasionally, he descended into literariness. This was especially, although not exclusively, true in his poetry, most of which he wrote before 1900: often it listeth toward Georgian preciousness. Even in his philosophical works—the bulk of his output—Santayana tended to prefer nimble metaphor to patient exposition or argument. This preference is not, I hasten to add, necessarily a liability, even philosophically. As the philosopher David Stove observed, "some of the best philosophers never argue at all. . . . Santayana, for example. He simply tells you how he thinks the world is, and delicately makes fun of some other philosophers . . . who think there is more to the world, or less, than he does."

Besides, at his best—and he was often at or near his best—Santayana wrote with beguiling grace. Although he was a professor of philosophy for more than twenty years, he was never pedantic or willfully obscure. Even at his most technical (which was not all that technical)—in the five-volume *Life of Reason* (1905–1906), say, or *Scepticism and Animal Faith* (1923)—he is accessible to the educated general reader. His charm is irresistible. He begins *Scepticism and Animal Faith*, for example, with the admission that he comes bearing "one more system of philosophy."

If the reader is tempted to smile, I can assure him that I smile with him, and that my system

. . . differs widely in spirit and pretensions from what usually goes by that name. In the first place, *my system is not mine, nor new*. I am merely attempting to express for the reader the principles to which he appeals when he smiles.

Santayana is every bit as clever as any German metaphysician, only he is light-years less ponderous. It is important to stress that Santayana is accessible not merely stylistically—in the singing clarity of his prose—but also in terms of content. His philosophy dealt not with difficult abstractions but with matters of patent human exigency. “It was happiness or deliverance,” he wrote in “A General Confession,” an intellectual self-précis written in the 1930s, “that alone really concerned me. This alone was genuine philosophy: this alone was the life of reason.”

Above all, Santayana wrote to be read. For many readers, he is most agreeable as an occasional essayist—in *Soliloquies in England* (1922), for example, which was written during and just after World War I when Santayana had installed himself in Great Britain. Ostensibly bagatelles on miscellaneous topics from “Atmosphere,” “Cloud Castles,” and “Dons” to “Death-Bed Manners” and “Sky-larks,” these fugitive pieces are full of pungent observation and sound judgment. Writing about “The British Character,” at a moment when England was still mistress of an empire, he notes that “What governs the Englishman is his inner atmosphere, the weather in his soul.”

Instinctively the Englishman is no missionary, no conqueror. He prefers the country to the town, and home to foreign parts. He is rather glad and relieved if only natives will remain natives and strangers strangers, and at a comfortable distance from himself. Yet outwardly he is most hospitable and accepts almost anybody for the time being; he travels and conquers without a settled design, because he has the instinct of exploration. His adventures are all external; they change him so little that he is not afraid of them. He carries his English weather in his heart wherever he goes, and it becomes a

cool spot in the desert, and a steady and sane oracle amongst all the deliriums of mankind. Never since the heroic days of Greece has the world had such a sweet, just, boyish master. It will be a black day for the human race when scientific blackguards, conspirators, churls, and fanatics manage to supplant him.

That is eloquently said, and the intervening eighty-odd years have underscored its accuracy.

Pleasure of a certain refined stamp was Santayana’s lodestar in life, and such pleasure was what he sought to communicate through his writing. The beautifully produced Triton Edition (limited to some 950 sets) was the perfect correlative of Santayana’s style. It has no editorial notes. But it makes up in readability what it lacks in critical apparatus. It is an edition to be read.

The MIT edition is meant to be . . . Well, let’s see. *The Letters of George Santayana: Book One, [1868]–1909*¹ is the first of a projected eight volumes of letters. Altogether, those eight books will count as Volume V in the Critical Edition of Santayana’s works.² Daniel Cory, who met Santayana in 1927 when he was twenty-two and who became the aging philosopher’s confidante, secretary, and literary executor, brought out a selection of letters in 1955. That volume includes some 300 letters; he added dozens more in a 1963 portrait of Santayana’s later years. Santayana’s letters—some of them, anyway—are certainly worth reading. Consider this 1937 missive to Cory about Ezra Pound:

For Heaven’s sake, dear Cory, do stop Ezra Pound from sending me his book. Tell him I

1 *The Letters of George Santayana: Book One, [1868]–1909*, edited and with an introduction by William G. Holzberger; MIT Press, 582 pages, \$55.

2 In addition to *Persons and Places*, editions of *The Sense of Beauty* (first published in 1896), *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* (1900), and *The Last Puritan* have appeared in the Critical Edition as of this writing. Another volume of letters, covering the period 1910–1920, is due out imminently.

have no sense for true poetry, admire (and wretchedly imitate) only the putrid Petrarch and the miserable Milton; that I don't care for books, have hardly any, and would immediately send off his precious volume to the Harvard Library or to some other cesspool of infamy. That is, if he made me a present of it. If he sent it only for me to look at and return, I would return it unopened; because I abhor all connection with important and distinguished people, and refuse to see absolutely anyone except some occasional stray student or genteel old lady from Boston.

Good stuff, no? But the Critical Edition will run to some 3000 letters. Are they all indispensable? The present volume, which takes Santayana through schooldays to the threshold of fame at age forty-six, contains about 350 letters. Some, like those to William James, his teacher and then senior colleague at Harvard, shed light on his thought. Some, like those to the sexually ambidextrous William Morton Fullerton (the lover of Edith Wharton, among many others), are amusing and provide glimpses into Santayana's developing character. Not a few are like this one from 1906 to his beloved half-sister (and godmother) Susana: "April 3.—It is delightful here in Montpellier. I think constantly of Avila & Greece. It is Spring at last." How many such reports do we really need?

This volume also features—in addition to the standard preface, acknowledgments, introduction, bibliography, index, and copious footnotes—some twenty pages of textual commentary, a long chronology of Santayana's life as well as a register of the dozens of addresses he occupied in the course of his many European and American travels. There are sixty pages of textual notes, which detail Santayana's every misspelling, crossing out, and insertion (e.g., "sharinge • ['e' over 'ing']"). There is a list of manuscript locations, letter recipients, and thus-far unlocated letters. There is even a Report of Line-End Hyphenation, which to my eye has an undeniable poetry: "good-looking" is followed by "anti-Hegelianism," which is followed by "ghost-and-faery-

blind," etc.: a euphonious and edifying procession.

I wonder whether this is the sort of rescue from neglect that John McCormick had in mind? Such attention implies a certain flattery, of course. But then so does the process of embalming. It is not as if there are any grave difficulties about the texts that Santayana bequeathed to posterity. We are not dealing with a heap of damaged, barely legible papyrus or collations of scribal errors, after all. We are dealing with an eminently accessible twentieth-century writer whose texts are about as transparent and unproblematic as texts can be. It is interesting to speculate about what Santayana would have made of the Critical Edition of his work. His sense of humor, I suspect, and possibly his vanity, would have been gratified: Santayana always had a lively appreciation of the absurd. His sense of proportion would have been appalled.

Santayana enjoyed aspects of college life. He liked the semi-cloistered existence, the intellectual intimacy with burgeoning young minds, the easy proximity to handsome young faces. But he always loathed the academic industry. Indeed, no sooner had he started teaching than he began plotting his escape. Being a teacher, he remarked in *Persons and Places*, was forced upon him by the necessity of earning a living, "but being a student was my vocation." He lived frugally, saved diligently, and was finally able to announce his departure in 1912, just shy of fifty, when his mother died leaving him a legacy of \$10,000 (nearly \$200,000 today). He left for Europe and never set foot in the United States again. (Santayana was not without affection for America, but he liked to say that his love for it, like his love for Spain, was "manifested . . . by living there as little as possible.")

Harvard, Santayana thought, had been ruined by people like Charles Eliot, the ambitious president from 1869–1909, who strove to transform Harvard College into a great modern university. Eliot and Santayana were like oil and water. Early in his teaching career, Santayana chanced to en-

counter the president; asked about the progress of his classes, Santayana explained that he had finished with Plato and was moving on to Aristotle. "No, no, Santayana," Eliot said, "what I mean by my enquiry is, *how many* students have enrolled for your lectures?"

It wasn't just a matter of administrative expansionism that bothered Santayana, though. The very discipline of academic philosophy rubbed him the wrong way. "That philosophers should be professors is an accident," he wrote, "and almost an anomaly. Free reflection about everything is a habit to be imitated, but not a subject to expound; and an original system, if the philosopher has one, is something dark, perilous, untested, and not ripe to be taught, nor is there much danger anyone will learn it." Looking back on his Harvard days in *Character and Opinion in the United States* (1920), he spoke of the new breed of philosophy professor who was "very professional in tone and conscious of his *Fach*," "open-minded, whole-hearted, appreciative," but also—deadly phrase—"toasted only on one side."

It is sometimes suggested that William James, though he died in 1910, had been instrumental in poisoning the atmosphere for Santayana at Harvard. This is emphatically not the case. Everyone quotes James's description of Santayana's early work as exhibiting a "perfection of rottenness" and "moribund Latinity." Few supply the context: "The great event in my life recently," James wrote to a colleague in 1900,

has been the reading of Santayana's book [*Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*]. Although I absolutely reject the platonism of it, I have literally squealed with delight at the imperturbable perfection with which the position is laid down. . . . I now understand Santayana, the man. I never understood him before. But what a perfection of rottenness in a philosophy! I don't think I ever knew the anti-realistic view to be propounded with so impudently superior an air. It is refreshing to see a

representative of moribund Latinity rise up and administer such reproof to us barbarians in the hour of our triumph.

James ends by asking that his letter be passed along to Santayana, adding: "He is certainly an *extraordinarily distingué* writer. Thank him for existing!"

Temperamentally, the two men were complete opposites—James bluff, hearty, the thorough New England pragmatist in manner as well as philosophical outlook: Santayana the super-refined, sonnet-writing, exquisitely disillusioned Catholic Spaniard. In many ways, Santayana was closer in spirit to William's brother Henry. They met only once, in England, toward the end of Henry's life. "In that one interview," Santayana recalled—sadly, I think—he "made me feel more at home and better understood than his brother William ever had done in the long years of our acquaintance. Henry was calm, he liked to see things as they are, and be free afterwards to imagine how they might have been." High praise from that apostle of clarity animated by subjunctive dispensation. Despite their differences, however, there was no contemporary to whom Santayana owed more, intellectually, than William James, whose "sense for the immediate," "for the unadulterated, unexplained, instant fact of experience" Santayana celebrated. The problem with Harvard was not William James but the increasing professional drift of the institution.

Although the Critical Edition of Santayana's works will probably help resuscitate the philosopher as a subject of academic lubrication—we can expect, I believe, to see an uptick in dissertations on his work—there is a sense in which it is likely to extend rather than remedy the neglect he has suffered in recent decades. As John McCormick noted in his biography, Santayana "conveyed an attitude toward existence rather than a set of axioms, a totality of response rather than a geodetic survey of the world." That attitude, that totality of response, is not necessarily aided by excessive scholarly integument. Whatever one's final judgment about the

value of Santayana's philosophy, he is certainly among the most approachable of writers. The Critical Edition assumes an amount of starch and formality that is almost comically at odds with the spirit of this genial and smilingly radical writer.

Many people who know Santayana only from anthologies are surprised to discover how thoroughly naturalistic a thinker he was. It somehow seems strange for a poet of his sometimes trembling fervency. But right from the start Santayana's primary philosophical inspirations were radical materialists like Lucretius and Spinoza (Spinoza, he said, "in several respects laid the foundation of my philosophy").

Santayana's naturalism assured his implacable hostility to supernaturalism: the patent variety—his native Roman Catholicism, for example—as well as the covert versions populating many schools of philosophy—German idealism, say, in both its original and transplanted-to-England-and-America forms. (One of Santayana's most effective polemics is *Egotism in German Philosophy*, first published in 1916. The description of Hegel's dialectic as a futile attempt to make "things conform to words, not words to things" says everything one needs to know about that intellectual monstrosity.) In 1890, when he was in his late twenties, Santayana wrote to William James that "I doubt whether the earth supports a more genuine enemy of all that the Catholic Church *inwardly* stands for than I do," and he later noted that he had "never been what is called a practising Catholic." It was a position from which he never wavered. It is worth stressing this. Santayana spent the last twelve years of his life at the Blue Sisters' clinic in Rome. This has tempted some commentators to suggest that his atheism softened or even evaporated with age. But this was not the case. During his last illness, Santayana took pains to advise Daniel Cory that if he were unconscious and the sacrament of Extreme Unction were administered, no one should interpret that as a deathbed conversion.

But if Santayana was a thoroughly naturalistic thinker, he came armed with a remarkable aesthetic sensibility and native appreciation of the imaginative resources that religion offered. Religions, he insisted, "are the great fairy-tales of the conscience." Nevertheless he also believed that religions are indispensable, not least because they nurture the emotion of piety, "Man's reverent attachment to the sources of his being and the steadying of his life by that attachment." Santayana was the enemy of religion considered as dogma, as a repository of moral commandments or "literal" truth. (Santayana had little time, probably too little time, for what he dismissed as "literal truth." "My matured conclusion," he wrote, "is that no system is to be trusted, not even science in any literal or pictorial sense.")

But he also saw in religion an irreplaceable friend of human yearning. Its disappearance, hailed as an emancipation, actually brought forth new forms of bondage. "The absence of a positive religion," he wrote in the "General Confession," "was very far from liberating the spirit for higher flights: on the contrary, it opened the door to the pervasive tyranny of the world over the soul." When he looked around at the increasing secularization of the modern world, Santayana saw that the degradation of religion went hand-in-hand with the diminishment of culture. In "The Intellectual Temper of the Age" (1911), Santayana forlornly describes the dissolution of Christianity and the rise of "an emancipated, atheistic, international democracy."

In vain do we deprecate it; it has possession of us already through our propensities, fashions, and language. Our very plutocrats and monarchs are at ease only when they are vulgar. Even prelates and missionaries are hardly sincere or conscious of an honest function, save as they devote themselves to social work.

It goes without saying that he did not regard this development as a sign of spiritual health.

Santayana seems to have had an ingrained suspicion of almost everything beginning with “pro”: “professors,” as we’ve seen, but also “Protestantism,” “protégés,” “prophets,” and, above all, perhaps, “progress.” “Those who speak most of progress,” he wrote, “measure it by quantity and not by quality; how many people read and write, or how many people there are, or what is the annual value of their trade; whereas true progress would rather lie in reading or writing fewer and better things, and being fewer and better men, and enjoying life more.” At a time when nearly everyone—conservative as well as liberal—has difficulty dissociating the ideas of “more” and “better,” Santayana’s unorthodox remarks are worth pondering.

The philosopher Frederick Olafson noted that there exists in Santayana’s thinking “a pervasive animus against democracy and liberalism.” This is true. And it must be said that about some political matters, Santayana was naïve if not obtuse. In a letter of 1920, for example, he wrote to a former Harvard colleague that “I think to be born under Bolshevism would not be worse than to be born in Boston.” (Moscow, where Stalins speak only to Lenins, and the Lenins speak only to Marx?) But in other respects, Santayana’s traditionalist temperament and passion for individual liberty made him an astute social critic. He was especially penetrating about the contradictions of liberalism. In “The Intellectual Temper of the Age,” he noted that

Liberalism had been supposed to advocate liberty; but what the advanced parties that still call themselves liberal now advocate is control, control over property, trade, wages, hours of work, meat and drink, amusements, and in a truly advanced country like France control over education and religion; and it is only on the subject of marriage . . . that liberalism is growing more and more liberal.

In an important essay called “The Irony of Liberalism,” Santayana dilates on the element of social presumption that stands behind the liberal’s habit of coercion:

No man . . . can really or ultimately desire anything but what the best people desire. This is the principle of the higher snobbery; and in fact, all earnest liberals are higher snobs. If you refuse to move in the prescribed direction, you are not simply different, you are arrested and perverse. The savage must not remain a savage, nor the nun a nun, and China must not keep its wall. If the animals remain animals it is somehow through a failure of the will in them, and very sad. Classic liberty, though only a name for stubborn independence, and obedience to one’s own nature, was too free, in one way, for the modern liberal.

Liberalism in the modern sense is deeply hostile not only to tradition—tradition is by definition an impediment to “progress”—but also to “the wilder instincts of man”: “the love of foraging, of hunting, of fighting, of plotting, of carousing, or of doing penance.” (The inclusion of penance is a characteristic Santayana touch.) The perfect liberal society is one that excludes initiative.

The homogenizing imperative of liberalism has a psychological correlative in abstract moralism. Santayana memorably captures this in a vignette in *Persons and Places*. Under the rubric “A lesson in morals,” he recalls an episode after lunch one day when he was a young boy. A single piece of cake remained on a plate. He asked his mother whether he might have it. “No,” she said. “It is for the little birds.”

Though it was by no means a fixed habit of hers, she opened the window and spread the crumbs out for the sparrows. She did not care for sparrows, she never watched them or tried to tame them; and that day, having performed her act of zoological benevolence, she closed the window at once, and went upstairs to sit as usual in her own room. . . . I am sure that in her silence she felt that she had given me a lesson in justice and in universal love. She had kept the cake from her son and given it to the sparrows. She was a liberal in politics.

One is tempted to add, after the fashion of his beloved Spinoza, Q.E.D.

Santayana was a curious hybrid. In one way, he was every bit as radical a thinker as Schopenhauer (whom he greatly admired) or Nietzsche (whom he did not). Ultimately, though, he was the cheerful, affirmative figure that Nietzsche pretended to be but wasn't. (No one, I think, ever accused Schopenhauer of being cheerful.) What Santayana described as his "scepticism" ran very deep indeed. "The truth is a terrible thing," he has the vicar of Iffley say in *The Last Puritan*. "It is much darker, much sadder, much more ignoble, much more inhuman and ironical than most of us are willing to admit, or even able to suspect." That is just the sort of thing one might expect to find in Nietzsche ("Truth is ugly," he declared in *The Will to Power*). But where Nietzsche engaged in unending histrionics, Santayana behaved like a gentleman. Nietzsche described himself as "the Antichrist," said he was "dynamite," and presumed to instruct us about "how to philosophize with a hammer." Santayana was much calmer. He sought no detonations. He wished to smash no idols. He came much closer, in fact, to being the disabused spiritual aristocrat that Nietzsche admired but sweated too much to resemble. "Criticism," Santayana said, "must first be invited to do its worst." But only for the indelicate, he thought, did thoroughgoing criticism lead to nihilism or madness. Out of scepticism came faith, but it was an *animal* faith, modest, grateful, thoroughly materialistic: disillusioned but also at peace.

There were two interrelated sources of Santayana's calm. One was his aestheticism. Santayana strove to regard the entire world as a thing of beauty, which is to say a source of pleasure. (In his early book *The Sense of Beauty* [1896] he defined beauty as "pleasure objectified": inadequate as a definition, no doubt, but useful as a barometer of temperament.) "I can draw no distinction," he wrote in a mature summing-up, "—save for academic programmes—between moral and aesthetic values: beauty being a good, is a moral good; and the practice and enjoyment of art, like all practice and all enjoy-

ment, fall within the sphere of morals—at least if by morals we understand moral economy and not moral superstition." Santayana attempted to provide a philosophical justification for this thoroughgoing aestheticism with what he called his doctrine of "essences." How do we know that what we believe is true is true? what we find beautiful is in fact beautiful? Are we not everywhere besieged by error and illusion? Yes, but Santayana proposes

to entertain the illusion without succumbing to it, accepting it openly as an illusion, and forbidding it to claim any sort of being but that which it obviously has; and then . . . it will not deceive me. What will remain of this non-deceptive illusion will then be a truth, and a truth the being of which requires no explanation, since it is utterly impossible that it should be otherwise.

How convincing is this? Not very. The fact that we embrace an illusion as an illusion does not automatically grant it the patent of truth. But it is worth noting that Santayana's criterion of trustworthiness is a quality often accorded to aesthetic and religious experience, namely the conviction that contingency, if but momentarily, had been defeated. It is also worth noting that it is not an attitude peculiar to Santayana. Wallace Stevens, for example, advocated something similar when he wrote that "The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and you believe in it willingly."

There are many problems with Santayana's (and Stevens's) aestheticism. The chief problem is its subjectivity. By locating the criterion of morality and truth in a species of pleasurable sensation, Santayana in effect denies them any public measure. This means that—I won't call it the validity, but the attractiveness of Santayana's ideal depends largely on the quality of the individual espousing it. In the delicate hands of a Santayana this doctrine might provide a workable philosophy of life. Not everyone

has the sensibility, the discipline, the restraint to make "all practice and all enjoyment fall within the sphere of morals."

The relation between enjoyment and restraint brings us to the other source of Santayana's calm, his Epicureanism. Colloquially, "epicurean" is often used to mean "devoted to sensuous pleasure." In fact, though, Epicureanism is a deeply ascetic philosophy. It is devoted to pleasure, but pleasure understood as the absence of pain. The goal is *ataraxia*: privative tranquillity: at peace because *not* disturbed by emotional tumult. Not so much happiness as invulnerability. In *The Last Puritan* (a model for which was Walter Pater's *Marius the Epicurean*), Santayana has his alter-ego Oliver Alden remark that "I have the Epicurean contentment, which is not far removed from asceticism." Santayana early on learned to regard the world as a threat that could be best countered by holding it at bay. The phrase "a detached observer" recurs frequently in his writings. It names not simply an intellectual ideal but an emotional imperative. "The moral pageantry of this world," Santayana wrote, "is calculated wonderfully to strengthen and refine the philosophy of abstention suggested to Epicurus by the flux of material things and by the illusions of vulgar passions."

Which passions were not vulgar? Those that did not collude to involve us emotionally—the dispassionate passions of observation, retrospection, and amused noninvolvement. In the 1890s, one of Santayana's colleagues at Harvard noted that "Santayana impressed us as an onlooker in the world more than a sharer in its struggle." It was an impression that Santayana was careful to cultivate, and it nurtured the reputation he had (despite his conspicuous financial generosity) for emotional chilliness. Daniel Cory reports that in 1931 when he told Santayana about the death of his old friend Frank Russell, the philosopher "reacted not at all." Taken aback, Cory asked: "Mr. Santayana, if I dropped dead in front of you at this moment, would you be emotionally moved at all?" To which Santayana replied:

"You should not ask me personal questions." Santayana later added that he had known Russell "long ago," etc., but the impression of glacial *noli me tangere* persisted.

Santayana's distance from involvement was a leitmotif of his character. By disposition, he was homosexual, though it is not clear that he was ever sexually involved with anyone. Reflecting on a meeting he had with A. E. Housman, Santayana mused to Cory that "I think I must have been that way in my Harvard days—although I was unconscious of it at the time." McCormick regarded that as deliberately coy, but supplied no evidence to gainsay it. Santayana regarded sex the way he regarded emotional entanglements generally, as temptations to be avoided. "Carnal pleasures," he wrote, "are but welcome pains, [they] draw the spirit inwards into primal darkness and indistinction." Perhaps it was fortunate that Santayana was, or made himself, unsusceptible to such pleasures. "Love has never made me long unhappy, nor sexual impulse uncomfortable," he wrote in a letter of 1924. Burdens, responsibilities, emotional ties: these sutures of ordinary life are among the chief evils in the Epicurean's lexicon. Disturbing tranquility, they remind us of our essential poverty, our lack of self-sufficiency. But of course such entanglements are also our most reliable sources of joy. I suspect that this is something that Santayana understood, even if he refrained from indulging it. "It takes patience to appreciate domestic bliss," he wrote in *The Life of Reason*; "volatile spirits prefer unhappiness." Santayana did not at all prefer unhappiness. But he was reluctant to wager on a bliss burdened with the imperfections of the domestic. In a letter of 1924, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., put his finger on something essential about Santayana. "In a general way," Holmes wrote, "his thinking more than that of other philosophers coincides with mine. But he has a patronizing tone—as of one who saw through himself but didn't expect others to." Such is the fate of those who aspire to be "The one invulnerable man among/ Crude captains."

Guerrillophilia & the sincerely frivolous

by Anthony Daniels

Not long ago in Paris, I went to see a laudatory full-length documentary film about General Massoud, the former commander of the Afghan Northern Alliance. The commercial chances of the film had been much improved by the assassination of Massoud shortly before its release, and those who had seen the film were invited to write their thoughts in a *livre blanc* in the foyer of the cinema.

It is an undoubted, though lamentable, fact that such *livres blancs* bring out the banal in every human mind. The work of even the most sublime artists never fails to provoke embittered reflections on the inaccessibility of the lavatories in the galleries. And Canadians, I have noticed, invariably take the opportunity to express their desire for universal peace and brotherhood. But in the rue Monsieur le Prince, one thought predominated: that Massoud was “el Che” of our times.

There are no prizes, of course, for guessing which el Che the cinemagoers were here referring to. Guerrillophilia is alive and well among the broad masses of the intellectuals of the Left Bank, as they consume their way elegantly through life. The fact that el Che’s economic ideas would, if put into practice, make North Korea seem like a shopper’s paradise has not yet penetrated their consciousness. What counts—as in a romantic novel—is the hero’s dark smouldering eyes, and the fact that he died young in a state of permanent adolescent revolt.

Inside every rebel, of course, there’s a dictator trying to get out. The majority of revolutionaries—at least those of bourgeois origin—object not so much to the injustice of the social arrangements into which they were born, as to the fact that they did not themselves make them. This is an affront to their self-importance, a kind of *lèse-ego*, which explains why in most cases (if they are successful) they establish regimes that are infinitely more oppressive than those they have replaced. They hope imperatively to imprint their beautiful personalities on all subsequent history.

Giangiacomo Feltrinelli was the archetypal egoistic upper-middle-class rebel. Born into one of the richest families in northern Italy, with interests in everything from timber to railroads and merchant banking, he joined the Communist Party as a young man, broke with it because it was insufficiently revolutionary, became an admirer of the Cuban Revolution and of Che Guevara, convinced himself that Italy was in the throes of a fascist reaction, went underground as the head of a revolutionary splinter group, and was killed in 1972, at the age of forty-five, while trying to blow up two electricity pylons just outside Milan. He hoped that such acts of sabotage would provoke a general proletarian uprising that would lead to a final and complete liberation—that is to say, totalitarian tyranny.

Where Feltrinelli differed from others of his tribe was in the fact that, before he blew

himself to smithereens without so much as interrupting the Milanese power supply for an instant, he had been a successful, indeed a distinguished, publisher. It was his firm that had first published Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*, and retained the copyright for the entire world; it was his firm also that published one of the great classics of twentieth-century Italian, or world, literature, Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's *Leopard*, after it had been rejected by two of Italy's largest publishers. He was also the first publisher anywhere to publish a translation of García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Such repeated good judgment could not have been the result of mere luck.

Senior Service, by Feltrinelli's son Carlo, is a memoir only to a very limited extent, for the author was a mere eleven years old when his father died. Most of the book is a reconstruction of his father's life by means of documentation, as if the author were not related to its subject. It is this peculiar objectivity that gives the book its impact and power: for beneath the detachment of the prose one senses the author's desperate attempt to discover and understand his origins, about which, until he researched the book, he knew little. Filial piety—which is understandably strong in someone who lost his father early in life—struggles with intellectual honesty. The latter does not always win.

Feltrinelli junior finds it difficult to face up to the fact that his father's ideals, in whose name he was virtually abandoned by him, were not generous or noble in the least, but—in the light of the historical experience easily available to the elder Feltrinelli for many years before he resorted to revolutionary terrorism—thoroughly monstrous. The author's difficulty arises not merely from a personal desire to express filial piety, but from the need of a large part of the fashionable western European intelligentsia (with which he identifies and to

which he is affiliated) to avoid full acknowledgment of its own guilty past with regard to its support, explicit or implicit, of Communism. This intelligentsia now suffers from its own version of the Vichy syndrome, the amnesia from which French society (including the left-wing intelligentsia) suffered for many years, whose purpose was to disguise from itself the extent of its own complicity with, or nonresistance to, the Nazi occupation.

When Feltrinelli junior deals with his father's Communism, he resorts to *langue de bois*. As Orwell remarked, insincerity is the enemy of clear language. Here is what the younger Feltrinelli has to say of the impact of the events of 1956 upon leftists:

The steady trickle of news about unheard-of things said by Khrushchev in his Report to the 20th Party Congress (February 1956), the fifty-four workers killed by the militia during the strikes in Poznan (June), and the feeling that a tragedy was looming in the interim between the Red Army's first and second intervention in Budapest (23 October to 3 November) triggered a malaise that involved both questions of policy and questions proper to the intellectual sphere. A qualitative leap forward was required in the critical capacities of the entire Left.

Thus the author wholly and uncritically accepts the outrageous self-serving lie that Khrushchev's speech revealed anything at all that the world didn't already know. On the contrary, it belonged almost to the category of David Irving's work with regard to the Final Solution and the Third Reich: namely the category of minimizing apologetics. Even a superficial knowledge of the literature establishes beyond all possible dispute that the nature (if not quite the extent) of the atrocities committed by the Bolshevik regime was known, or at least easily knowable, from the very first, from scores of published eyewitness accounts and academic works published as, or only shortly after, the atrocities were committed. The suppression of all intellectual freedom, the

¹ *Senior Service: A Story of Riches, Revolution, and Violent Death*, by Carlo Feltrinelli; Granta Books, 464 pages, £20.

persecution of religion, the material shortages, the manufactured famines, the deadening imposition of a compulsory official philosophy from which dissent was impossible, the disappearance of untold numbers of writers, intellectuals, and scientists, the sinister but ludicrous cult of personality were all perfectly well known because they were unavoidably obvious.

Yet Feltrinelli senior and his ilk contrived to miss them, for reasons that boil down to a combination of callous indifference and personal vanity, just as they contrived to miss the astonishing economic progress of Italy that took place under their very noses, thanks to the entrepreneurial energy and flair of the country's bourgeoisie. It seems to me unlikely that the millions of victims of Communism would have been much consoled had they known that their deaths would eventually become questions "proper to the intellectual sphere" for the well-heeled of Milan and Paris.

The idea that people such as Feltrinelli were finally disillusioned by the mere bagatelle of the shooting of fifty-four unfortunate Poles is almost laughable in its naïveté. This would have been an instance not so much of straining at a gnat to swallow a camel as of straining at a bacterium to swallow a pod of whales. It is as if a Nazi were suddenly to lose his faith in the beneficence of Nazism because of the savagery of the execution of the July plotters. On the contrary, it was the loss of Communism's revolutionary élan in Russia and subsequent relative moderation that appalled most of the intellectuals.

Needless to say, there is another reason that the younger Feltrinelli finds himself unable to call a spade a spade: had he done so, he would have been denounced as a crude cold warrior by all who counted. And what are the deaths of millions, or tens of millions, to set beside the horror of being despised by the intelligentsia?

The passage I have quoted is not an isolated one, a mistake that any book as long as his *must* contain. The author passes over unnoticed and in silence the irony (that

renders satire impossible) of the Italian Communist leader Togliatti writing an introduction to a Feltrinelli edition of Voltaire's work on toleration. And here is the author, writing admiringly of his father's refusal to become "a paladin of anti-Sovietism" after the publication of *Doctor Zhivago*:

The tragic thing about the history of Communism is that being anti-Soviet always means being anti-communist and you really could not be a Communist and go against the October Revolution, the echo of which was still too enormous.

The tragic thing about the history of Communism? Perhaps it was so for the comrades of the Via Cavour, but I doubt that those who actually lived under the regimes of Stalin, Mao Tse-tung, Kim Il Sung, Enver Hoxha, et al. would agree. I doubt also that they would take kindly to a book by an Italian Communist psychotherapist that I have in my small collection of bibliographical oddities about how to help patients overcome the mourning and melancholia consequent upon the collapse of their beloved party, which gave meaning to their lives. Sometimes there are matters more important than how you really, really feel.

The younger Feltrinelli does not entirely escape his father's geurrilophilia, though, unlike him, he himself exhibits no inclination to pass from theory to practice. His admiring description of Abu Ammar, a.k.a. Yasir Arafat, at the Tricontinental Conference held in Havana in 1966, which his father attended, is a classic of its type: "a hard face, a generous expression." Here indeed is an instantiation of one of the three great laws of dialectical materialism, namely the unity of opposites. And the younger Feltrinelli is much impressed also by Abu Ammar's martial bearing: "He stubbed out his cigarette on the muddy toe of his boot." That Abu Ammar probably came by his muddy toe in Havana in much the same way as Laurence Olivier came by his dark face when he played Othello goes un-

noticed: it is the deliberate flouting of bourgeois refinement that is so impressive to a bourgeois like Feltrinelli. Fundamentally, the world revolution favored by the middle-class intelligentsia is a revolt against table manners.

Giangiacomo Feltrinelli's egotism—combined with his good literary judgment—stood him in good stead as a publisher, however. He was far too self-important to remain for long under anyone's intellectual tutelage or any party's ideological discipline. He wanted revolution, but only if he were the head of it himself. This gave him the moral courage to resist the blandishments, false promises and idle threats of the Soviets, who wanted him to delay indefinitely the publication of *Doctor Zhivago*. He entered into a double correspondence with Pasternak, one conducted clandestinely, and the other in full view of the Soviet authorities (in which Pasternak withdrew permission from Feltrinelli to publish). Pasternak gave differing instructions to Feltrinelli in the two correspondences, and Feltrinelli had the good sense, nerve, and courage to take the clandestine correspondence as representing Pasternak's real wishes. The relations between Pasternak and his publisher take up a considerable section of the book and are recounted in more detail than most people are likely to want to know.

Feltrinelli could not have predicted that he had a world bestseller on his hands that would have made his fortune had he not already had one, and he was not therefore actuated by purely commercial considerations. In publishing *Doctor Zhivago*, a book that rejects as totally and fundamentally as it is possible to do so the entire world outlook that his publisher and his associates took for granted as being inimical to civilization itself, Feltrinelli displayed either moral courage or an egotistical desire to establish that he was not going to be dictated to by anyone, the Soviet Union and the Italian Communist Party included. Either way, or both ways, the world had reason to be grateful to him. It also took courage to publish *The Leopard*, at least for a man who wanted no

enemies to his left: for a book more alien to the idea that "progress" could occur without the loss of anything of deep value, or that history was ascending to a triumphantly happy postrevolutionary conclusion, could scarcely be imagined.

Although Feltrinelli became an admirer of the Cuban Revolution, and also of Che Guevara (it was he who was responsible for promoting the famous romantic picture of Guevara that has since appeared on a million frivolous artefacts), he was not entirely blind to Castro's defects, largely because his own ego could not tolerate a position of subservience or inferiority with regard to another. Castro very early started the habit that has remained with him to this day, of making potential interviewers wait for days on end by a telephone, only to grant an interview suddenly and capriciously at three o'clock in the morning, thus achieving an automatic ascendancy over his interlocutor. This is the *líder máximo's* equivalent of Mussolini's habit of receiving visitors while sitting at a desk on a dais at the end of an immensely long room, the visitors naturally feeling like insects under the entomologist's gaze as they approached the dais. *Duces* and *líderes máximos* instinctively understand the psychology of these things.

Feltrinelli went on hunger strike, putting a notice to that effect on his hotel door, rather than submit to Castro's waiting game, and Castro gave in almost at once. As far as I know he is the only person who has successfully out-egoed the Cuban leader: and one cannot help but admire him for it.

Feltrinelli went to Cuba first to secure another world bestseller: Castro's memoirs. Here, he must have thought, was philanthropy and 500 percent. But he soon discovered that the Cuban leader's mind was too undisciplined to produce anything like a memoir. Castro was so in love with his own thoughts—merely because they were his—that he was incapable of restricting his verbal output to what others might wish to hear. Instead, he would go off at pseudo-philosophical tangents rather than stick

to the autobiographical point. (Feltrinelli himself, to judge by some of his writings quoted by the author, had a similar tendency.) Because others for him did not truly exist, except as a compulsory audience for his stream of consciousness, literary form was of no interest or use to him. Feltrinelli never got the memoirs, despite having paid \$25,000 in cash for them as a pre-advance.

Although he was clear-eyed about Castro's defects, and despite the dismal failure of Che Guevara in Bolivia (he was instrumental in saving and publishing Guevara's diaries), Feltrinelli nevertheless came to accept the Castroist theory of the *foco*, the small armed revolutionary group that would ignite a full-scale revolution by its propaganda of the deed. He abandoned his life as a bourgeois Marxist businessman and went underground for two years before his death. His son suggests that he provided the gun with which the Bolivian consul in Hamburg, Colonel Quintinilla, was assassinated in revenge for the capture and execution of Guevara. His "productivity" as a guerrilla, though, was not high. There was an opera buffa quality about his activities, including his doctrinal squabbles with other revolutionary groupuscules.

Like Macbeth, however, he had chosen his path, and he had passed the point at which to return were as tedious as to go o'er. One senses a melancholy and an inchoate regret in the letters he sent his son while he was in hiding. They were for the most part tender instructions to behave at school, to do his homework, to take care of the garden, etc. It is almost as if, having lost all possibility of enjoying the simple pleasures of domestic life ever again, Feltrinelli senior came to regret their absence.

But his political outlook remained fundamentally crude and unnuanced to the end. On the occasion of his son's eighth birthday, in 1970, he sent him a letter that was in effect his own political credo:

I had tried to explain to you, some time ago, how the world, and Italy too, is divided into

two kinds of persons, into two classes: those who have money, lands, factories and houses, and those who have no money, and have to work like dogs to earn some money, only a little, and often not even enough for them to live on. Those who have money, who have factories and land, become richer and richer by making others work and by profiting from the labour of the workers. It is obvious that between bosses and workers there has always been a struggle that sometimes becomes particularly tough and violent. Then the bosses recruit the Fascists, common delinquents, and they call in the police and the carabinieri.

Brezhnev couldn't have put it better himself. But Feltrinelli then goes on to explain that, though he himself has money, he has sided with the poor so that they "may finally have a decent life, so that they may send their children to school." The idea that children in Italy wouldn't go to school until Feltrinelli had blown up a sufficient number of electricity pylons shows the extent of his self-delusion.

By the end of the book, one feels more than one emotion. There is sorrow for a man—the author—who is obliged to call his father by his surname because he did not know him sufficiently well to call him by anything else. There is irritation and alarm that even now in European intellectual circles there is an unwillingness to recognize the Communist experiment for what it was. There is sorrow that Feltrinelli did not stick to publishing, at which he was clearly talented. And there is anger at the dishonesty of a man who was quite happy to appear as a model in the pages of a fashion magazine, as Feltrinelli did, but who wanted to bring about a world in which there would never again be any fashion to speak of.

Carlo Feltrinelli unwittingly captures not only the character of his father, but of an entire intelligentsia, in a phrase referring to an interview that Feltrinelli once gave to a glossy magazine. It was, says Feltrinelli junior, "semi-serious but sincere." Yes, Feltrinelli senior was sincerely frivolous.

Poems *by Laurie Lamon,*
Dick Allen & Wilmer Mills

Separating the flowers

I rinsed the stems
and lifted the dead blossoms
from those still palpable

with color and scent,
then set the vase down again
like a scale whose one side,

unburdened, rises.
The tiger lily lasted another
week. Lifting it, I thought

of Demeter and Mary
outlasting what must have felt,
at first, like desertion.

—*Laurie Lamon*

France

Surrealist of hedgerows, Baudelaire
Of weeds blown low within a hunter's brake,
Kite of sorrow in a small boy's frown,
And truffle scent beneath a winter lake,

How can I solve you? How can I begin
To push my breath out of your counterpane?
Who wrote the numbers on the widow's back
And tied my language to your liquid train?

Maze of computers, St. Joan of closed doors,
The skidding sound a thought makes in the dark,
Red wine of the internet, marshland of the Alps,
Tunnel of grass that hides a meadowlark,

Who placed those coffins in your bloodshot eyes,
Planned your wedding through binoculars?
How does chamber music brokerage a wave?
Where's the chiffon in a calendar?

Marseilles of footsteps, Notre Dame of rot,
Clipboard carrier of Vichy wounds,
Miser who throws pennies in the Seine
Because the Sorbonne stalks a waxing moon,

Why do wrinkles form on solid glass
And wrack the skin your Monet freeways roam?
In Roland's name, I ask these things of you,
Great Mystery Grimace all my poems storm.

—*Dick Allen*

Black Skimmers on the Gulf Coast

Rynchops niger

The afternoon increases as it wanes
And Skimmers, which are named for what they do,
Fly low above the water where they strain
A living morsel they don't need to chew.
Their liquid movements and ecstatic cries
Embody what is lingua franca here,
A place where Name and Motion compromise,
That is, a promise of remaining near.

But sea birds have no use for being named
By *homo sapiens*, ostensibly
In times of greater care for what was framed
When even Man was named more sensibly.
What matters is the movement of the bird.
Its flight is name enough, a substantive
Of verb as noun. They're like a German word.
Their form and function are their genitive.

While Man went all about acquiring things,
Destroying what he did not understand,
Black Skimmers owned the motion of their wings
As it has been for centuries of sand.
The more we own the less we have to name,
Unlike this bird whose flight defines the sea.
While afternoons increase the more they wane,
Black Skimmers skim oblivious to me.

— *Wilmer Mills*

Theater

Goin' to Afghanistan

by Mark Steyn

There was an extraordinary picture in *Newsweek* the other day of some ferocious bearded warriors. They turned out to be Green Berets dropped in Afghanistan early in the war to liaise with anti-Taliban forces. All thirty-something, trained as soldiers, emergency workers, horsemen, and linguists, they speak at least four languages and on the ground muddled through with Arabic for the first few days until they picked up a working knowledge of Dari and Pashto. Some of them were seen in, I think, Kandahar shortly after liberation, enjoying a game of buzkashi with the natives. Buzkashi is the local equestrian sport played with a headless calf that the rider has to scoop off the ground and tuck under his arm. American special forces playing buzkashi: that's what I call multiculturalism in action.

It's easy to patronize soldiers, and our "artists" do it more easily than most, which is why those Green Berets are so startling: if a special forces commando turns up in an American play, chances are he won't be a multilingual sophisticate but a psychopath with a buzz cut. It is a given that in our society the artist holds a special status by virtue of his unique insight: that's why channel surfing in almost any western nation in the last four months you can stumble across a panel of novelists, poets, choreographers, and playwrights discussing the slaughter of September 11th and the war in Afghanistan. No one would think of convening a panel of soldiers to discuss the

current off-Broadway season. But maybe that wouldn't be a bad idea. While Green Berets speak Dari and play buzkashi, America's playwrights have mostly retreated from the world, to a short checklist of familiar obsessions—growing up black in America, growing up gay in America, growing up gay in black America, etc.

This is where Tony Kushner comes in. Whatever else may be said, he's not parochial. Lots of guys were writing AIDS plays, but he decided to write the AIDS epic, and so, whatever one feels about it, *Angels In America* is the AIDS play, the play of the AIDS era. One reason for its success is that, in contrast to the authors of most AIDS plays, Kushner, though gay and a playwright, is not "a gay playwright." In these pages a few years ago, I compared him to David Belasco. Like Belasco with *Madam Butterfly*, he has an eye for the big subject, the broader canvas. The first Kushner play I saw, even before *Angels In America*, was *Slavs!*, a vaudeville peopled by gnarled old babushkas and the like riffing on the fall of Russian Communism. Put aside for a moment his *views* on the great issues of our time and give him credit for being engaged with the world in a way few other American dramatists are.

And now he and his remarkable sense of timing have pulled off their most ingenious coup de théâtre yet. *Homebody/Kabul* (produced at the New York Theatre Workshop) was written well before September 11th and

so has been credited for its almost eerie prescience, especially one line which seems like pure prophecy. An educated Afghan woman, blaming America for her country's oppressors, says, "You love the Taliban so much, bring them to New York. Well, don't worry, they're coming to New York. America!," she snorts.

I reckon Kushner got lucky here, but, on the strength of that line, he's now being hailed as even more of a genius than he was previously. He's not, and he doesn't have to be. Three years ago, Kika Markham (the wife of Corin Redgrave and sister-in-law of Vanessa—please, no groans) asked Kushner to write her a monologue. He mulls it over, puts the map up in the operations room, and sticks a little pin in the Khyber Pass. Amazing. The biggest change across the century is that where once the ambitious writer thrust outward to the distant horizon now he looks inward, sunk in introspection. Not Kushner. He didn't foresee the scale of September 11th, but then neither did the CIA or FBI. What he did do, as he worked and reworked his play from 1998 onwards, was identify the principal tributaries leading up to that dam burst: his script is woolly, wordy, and circuitous, but within its pages you'll find an awful lot about Afghan history, a little about Islamic culture, and a soupçon about the West's relationship to both. And, if you don't care for his take on these subjects (as some conservative critics don't), why blame Kushner? It's not his fault that there's no alternative view available on the New York stage: the fact is that, in the years since the Soviet retreat and the Taliban's rise and Osama's opening forays, no other working playwright thought any of these themes were worth writing about. What a place the New York theater would be if more writers could raise their eyes from their navels to the world, to embrace the big sweep of history. A decade or so back, in odd moments at London dinner parties, you could catch the various socialist colossi of Britain's subsidized theatrical establishment marveling at how they'd managed to miss completely the biggest story of the age—the fall of Com-

munist. But in New York the irrelevance—the absence of anything to say—appears not even to have been felt, never mind acknowledged. Only Tony Kushner was curious enough to want to write a play about Afghanistan.

So take it as read that the motivation for that coming-to-New-York speech is a tiresome leftie's generic critique of his own country. Be aware, too, that this play is also very long-winded. Staged by Declan Donnellan, the director of *Angels's* London production, *Homebody/Kabul* is a sprawling, languorous four hours, including passages in Pashto, French, Esperanto, and maybe a couple of languages I missed. Kushner never justifies the length for what is, narrative-wise, an underplotted and unresolved Agatha Christie on the North-West Frontier. But I see that even in disparaging it I've made it sound quite appealing, which it is.

Homebody/Kabul is divided into two sections: *Homebody* is an hour-long monologue delivered by the eponymous heroine in Britain; *Kabul* is a three-act play set in the eponymous capital after the Homebody has disappeared and her family has begun looking for her. Linda Emond's opening lines are riveting. "Our story begins at the very dawn of history, circa 3000 B.C.," she starts, and then explains: "I am reading from an outdated guidebook about the city of Kabul. In Afghanistan. In the valleys of the Hindu Kush mountains. A guidebook to a city which we all know, has . . . undergone change." The Homebody is at home in London, a garrulous English matron in pearls and cardigan, gushing over a travel guide from 1965, the last good time in Afghanistan, the final decade of King Zahir's reign. She speaks for the most part in long formal ornate meandering tapeworms of sentences, a cross between Mrs. Moore in *A Passage to India* and one of those rococo-erudite Afghan or Pakistani cabinet ministers who pop up on CNN to confound the anchors. When she lapses into the giddy sentiments of her own place and time, she sounds less convincing: "Oh, I love the

world!," she trills. "I love love love *love* the world!" You'll have guessed she's on antidepressants, her own and her husband's.

Homebody is a piece of one-act exhibitionism by Kushner: he does it because he can, and he's been rewarded by glowing reviews in which even critics who dislike the ensuing three hours coo over the depth of character and command of language and "dreamlike quality" of this opening section. By this, they mean you have a tendency to nod off, as odd fragments from Afghanistan's Fascinating Fact File emerge and retreat and circle around each other and Linda Emond at times audibly struggles, not so much with the British accent as with the dilemma of being someone with a British accent speaking with an Afghan voice. As she reads, her stream of consciousness flows off into digressions, about hats, ten pacooli hats made by a defingered Afghan whom she meets in a London store. Kushner's maimed milliner captures very well both the cadences of Asian English and the almost genetic Afghan ambivalence to everything:

It was hard work to get into the UK. I am happy here in the UK. I am terrified I will be made to leave the UK. I cannot wait to leave the UK. I despise the UK. I voted for John Major. I voted for Tony Blair. I did not, I cannot vote, I do not believe in voting, the people who ruined my hand were right to do so, they were wrong to do so, my hand is most certainly ruined, you will never understand, why are you buying so many hats?

Suddenly the English lady finds she can speak fluent Pashto, and, in her medication-fueled imagination, is whisked away by the hatseller to Kabul, where he makes love to her under a Chinara tree. The lovemaking over, she pays for her hats and leaves. The monologue ends with her singing along to Frank Sinatra's "It's Nice to go Trav'ling," a typical bit of Fifties pop exotica that sounds slightly dotty today:

It's very nice to just wander
The camel route to Iraq

It's oh so nice to just wander
But it's so much nicer
Yes it's oh so nice to wander back.

I'll say. But not the *Homebody*. No sooner has she finished her singalong, then she gives us Sammy Cahn's sentiments through Persian eyes, a seventeenth-century poem on the raptures of the Afghan capital: "I sing to the gardens of Kabul./ Even Paradise is jealous of their greenery."

On the same album as "It's Nice to go Trav'ling," *Come Fly With Me*, Sinatra also recorded that great staple of British Empire concert parties "On the Road to Mandalay," but in a swinging Billy May arrangement full of interpolated Frankisms:

Ship me somewhere east of Suez
Where the best is like the worst
And there ain't no Ten Commandments
And a *cat* can raise a thirst.

Kipling's daughter so disliked this take she managed to get it banned throughout the Commonwealth. But, whether serendipitously or otherwise, Kushner has hit upon a kind of Sinatrafied Kipling. East is East and West is West and the twain do meet in all manner of odd ways. Under the Taliban, all tunes Eastern or Western were banned, and so the potency of cheap music is all the more potent. The hat man longs to hear his English customer's Sinatra CD:

Ah, beautiful song that will not die, stardust of yesterday, music of years gone by. Who may solve its mystery? Why shall it make a fool of me? Some few of these LPs my parents—may they have the perfect happiness of Paradise—have leave to me when they are dead, some I have myself to buy at souks in Egypt, Ashkabad, Tashkent, Alma-Ata, airplane tickets to romantic places, yes? They go to extremes with impossible dreams, yes? And so my record player is smashed and all each of the LPs of me, *Popular Frank Sinatra Sings For Moderns*. . . . Slips through a door a door marked nevermore that was not there before. It is hard you will find to be narrow of mind.

Very nice. An Afghan speech constructed from American song lyrics—"Stardust," "What is This Thing Called Love?," "These Foolish Things." Even the album title is well-chosen—*Frank Sinatra Sings For Moderns*—for what could be more provocative to a regime at war with modernity? And once shattered, the past is impossible to rebuild: "A door marked nevermore/ That wasn't there before."

That's Johnny Mercer from "Days of Wine and Roses." "It is hard you will find/ To be narrow of mind" is Carolyn Leigh from "Young at Heart." Of course, if you're a Talib, it's not in the least bit hard to be narrow of mind. There's something very touching about a Sinatra-spouting Afghan retaining so many casual baubles of Tin Pan Alley whose easy rhymes encapsulate for him a whole world of lost promise.

For Kushner, the man represents a global pidgin culture, a world in which the great civilizations have not fused their glories but degraded each other. "All must be touched," says the Homebody. "All touch corrupts. All must be corrupted." Afghanistan is Kushner's case study: a put-upon land designated as a playing field for great-power rivalry, from the Moguls to the Russians to the British to the Soviets to the "American-backed" Taliban. There is a fevered summary of recent millennia. The British "seize" India. Hardly. Though the SAS commandos currently scouring Tora Bora are engaged in what's technically Britain's Fourth Afghan War, the previous three were comparatively short and, for the civilian population, relatively non-disruptive. If you'd been born in Afghanistan in 1887 and died there in 1973, you would have passed a long life in one of the most undisturbed corners of the planet—at least when compared to Germany or China, Russia or Japan, Ethiopia or Serbia.

But Kushner is not primarily interested in the world's impact on Afghanistan. A Pash-tun with a pash on tunes by Sinatra is a jest, a conceit unlikely to be found anywhere between Bost and Kandahar. Kushner is more

preoccupied by the Orient's impact on his Occidentals. By making his westerners British, he's concocted a contemporary Kipling rematch: West and East, English and Pash-tun, out on the North-West Frontier locked in a sordid reductio of the Great Game. The cosy English domestic setting (well conjured by the designer Nick Ormerod) is replaced by a shattered-brick set. We are in a Kabul hotel room, where the Homebody's husband and daughter are holed up trying to find out what's happened to her. It seems that, after her Afghan fantasy of Act One, she decided to go to Kabul for real. She went out for a stroll forgetting her burqa and accompanied only by forbidden Frank on her CD Walkman. What has happened to her? According to one version, she's been murdered by an anti-Western mob. This is 1998, just after Bill Clinton's diversionary raid on an empty al-Qaeda camp, when as Mr. Bush drolly put it he fired a \$2 million missile at a \$10 empty tent and hit a camel in the butt. It seems unlikely this would generate much "anti-Westernism." As the liberation of Kabul demonstrated, the Afghans didn't invest a lot of national pride in what was essentially a regime of colonial oppression, funded by Saudis and staffed by impressionable Pakistanis, Scots, and Californians. The other theory is that the Homebody has renounced her British identity and gone native, as the spouse of a good Muslim.

There's a vague familiarity to everything the minute we're in the hotel room. This is Graham Greene territory—expats, ethics, intrigue—and, either as in-joke or homage, Kushner even gives one of the locals the same former occupation as *Our Man In Havana*: he was a salesman of vacuum cleaner parts. The Westerners are the Homebody's hubby Milton Ceiling (Dylan Baker), their adult daughter Priscilla (Kelly Hutchinson), and, since the British severed diplomatic relations, a kind of honorary consul-cum-aid-worker called Quango Twistleton (Bill Camp). "Twistleton" is one of those slightly twitty English names, being one third of the triple-barrel of the British explorer Sir Ranulph Twistleton-Wyckham-

Fiennes. "Quango" sounds like P. G. Wodehouse but is in fact a British acronym, standing for Quasi-Autonomous Non-Governmental Organization. As an aid worker with various ancillary activities, Quango is literally his own QUANGO. He is the stereotypical seedy expat, even his opium addiction heady with the whiff of nostalgia. True, he puts Priscilla's knickers on his head and masturbates, which Somerset Maugham might have balked at. Milton is something in computers and loathes Priscilla. Priscilla, who got knocked up at eighteen and tried to kill herself, is a foul-mouthed harridan.

If Osama bin Laden met these three specimens in Kabul, mired as they are in a swamp of booze, drugs, and joyless sex, they would no doubt confirm all his fiercely held views on Western decadence. If there's any point to the exhaustive repulsiveness of the British half of the *dramatis personae*, it would seem to be that Kushner is inverting the perspective of traditional Imperial drama: the English are the primitive exotics, the Afghans are cultured, educated, artistic, urbane, articulate, poets, and librarians, masters of all the virtues the metropolitan power once claimed for itself. I found this argument, if such it is, somewhat undermined by the casting. The natives are mostly played by Asian-Americans—an odd distinction as Afghans are Caucasian, and Asian-Americans are mostly from Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam, etc. The only one who struck me as plausibly Afghan was the lady who gives that warning to New York, and she's played by a Briton—Rita Wolf, a British-Asian actress born in India who was in the film *My Beautiful Laundrette* fifteen years ago and has struggled to find prominent roles since. Miss Wolf's is the performance that stays with you—frenzied, gripping and disturbing, a Muslim librarian unhinged by life under the Taliban. "I have nothing to read!" she wails.

But this is thin reward for a four-hour investment. Kushner lacks Greene's interest in moral crisis, and no one seems to care very much about what happened to the Home-

body, so it's hardly surprising we don't. Though we spend a long evening with these people, Miss Wolf's librarian is the only one who truly lives. The rest seem unformed, sketches for a play yet to be written.

So you come away feeling oddly cheated. Unlike *Kim* or John Buchan's *Greenmantle* or any other standard piece of Imp Lit, the world of *Homebody/Kabul* never seems to exist on its own terms. The characterizations and plot are full of holes: one lengthy subplot concerns a Muslim husband trying to figure out a way to get rid of his first wife. Say what you like about the Taliban, but that's one thing that's not a problem over there. And, even as emblems of all that is most sordid and pitiful about the West, Kushner's Brits are unsatisfactory: nobody here is as ghastly or "culturally insensitive" as Yvonne Ridley, the real-life Fleet Street hackette arrested by the Taliban, who kept moaning to her captors that she'd kill for a chilled Chardonnay. Back in London, she spent a fortnight cranking out a book about her experiences that reads like *Bridget Jones's Afghan Diary*. Modern Britons may indeed be as awful as Kushner says, but not usually so dull.

As for the history, the context, the big questions, the "root causes," they're all in there somewhere or other, alluded to on this page, back-referenced on that, but not in a way that invites us to re-think our preconceptions. At one level, it's puzzling: One of the reasons why the left's "peace movement" got nowhere after September 11th was because they were obvious know-nothings, the lame generalities of their demo placards untroubled by anything so tiresome as a verifiable fact about the region. Here, in contrast, is a left-wing playwright who's taken the trouble to unearth ten-thousand facts and yet in the end has as little to say as the ignoramuses. *Homebody/Kabul* has a handful of piercing vignettes in search of a drama. As a playwright, Tony Kushner knows where to go but not what to do when he gets there.

Paris in winter: thank heaven for Morandi

by Karen Wilkin

Going to exhibitions this winter in Paris was not for the fainthearted. It required a willingness to endure the overblown, the repetitive, and, at times, the downright disgusting, although fortunately there were occasional alternatives to the hard stuff. In the overblown and repetitive category, the Centre Georges Pompidou offered an obsequious retrospective of Jean Dubuffet (September 13–December 31, 2001) organized on the principle that if two or three works of a given period were worth looking at, then fifteen—whatever their merits—were even better.

It began well enough, with his seldom-seen earliest works and a selection of the faux-naïf paintings that established his reputation: charming snub-nosed cows, raunchy nudes, and crowded street scenes with irrational perspectives, sophisticated images masquerading as the work of a gifted outsider or a shrewd child. But once the exhibition began to deal with the signature red, white, and blue “jigsaw” paintings of the years of Dubuffet’s greatest fame, the curators seemed to abdicate choice in favor of quantity. (Was this an effort to please the often distinguished owners of these formulaic, mannered pictures?) The curators seemed similarly uncritical of the sculptures, those essentially unsculptural, overscaled cookie-cutter shapes imprinted with the artist’s characteristic interlocking black lines. The show revived a bit at the end, since in his last, rough, composite paintings, Du-

buffet seemed once again to address the issues of touch, surface, and simplified image-making that had animated the best of his early pictures, but by the time you reached this section, the vast amount of mediocrity that preceded it had taken its toll. The most vivid image I carried away was of an installation of “sculpture-benches” and wall-mounted pieces meant to evoke one of Dubuffet’s outdoor “gardens.” The benches were all occupied by exhausted-looking visitors, none paying the least attention to Dubuffet’s work, but instead transfixed by the rooftops and winter sky framed by the windows. Who could blame them?

I was pleased to discover at the Pompidou a survey of Jean Nouvel’s recent international projects (December 6, 2001–March 4, 2002), since I’ve been interested for some time in his architecture, which includes the Institut du Monde Arabe with its high-tech version of traditional Islamic patterning and the suave, glittering Maison Cartier, as well as some robust, bare-bones housing in the South of France. Alas, in contrast to the museum’s intelligent, illuminating retrospective of Renzo Piano’s work about a year ago, the Nouvel show was an exercise in promotion: no drawings, no plans, no elevations, and no models to speak of, just backlit color images, some billboard size, some jumping through digital hoops, in dark rooms. You entered the show by plunging into a black box lined

with rows of tiny, backlit images of Nouvel's recent work, like repetitive, glowing wallpaper. At regular intervals, television monitors offered the man himself, close up, pronouncing (to counteract any suggestion of egomania, a photo-mural wall towards the end presented the portraits, names, and titles of every person in Nouvel's office). I might have been more tolerant of the *mise en scène* had I been excited by what was visible in the overly artful presentation of the architecture, but the things I had liked about Nouvel's earlier work—delicate scale, elegant details, and rigorous relationships of spaces—seem to have been superseded by futuristic spatial concepts and fashionable ideas about merging interior and exterior for ecological reasons.

An alternative to all this bombast was a modest show of drawings by Marlene Dumas, a South African resident for some years in Holland, also at the Pompidou (October 11–December 31, 2001). Like many of our younger artists, Dumas uses drawing as a diary or meditation—I suppose the literary equivalent would be confessional poetry—producing serial images of agile figures enacting stripped-down autobiographical or political dramas or performing private rituals. She also makes series of oversized confrontational heads, some of friends, some wildly diverse portraits of an androgynous Christ. In these, Dumas largely dispensed with the conventional notions of rendering the head as a mass against a background and instead made the sheet of paper itself an equivalent for the plane of the face, as Matisse sometimes did. Dumas's drawings explore familiar territory, but they are set apart by her evident intensity of feeling and her delight in the medium as an expressive element, rather than as a neutral means of depiction. The emotional resonance of her best works depends as much on the contrast between—say—pools of tone and fragile line as it does on the evocative qualities of her imagery.

At the Louvre, the much discussed “La Peinture comme crime” (“Painting as

crime”) (October 19, 2001–January 14, 2002) was a definite contender for worst show I have ever seen—and that includes a gathering of puerile, often amateurish videos and installations at the Mendel Art Gallery, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, last year (don't ask), conceived to address the question “Where do the art gallery and the abattoir intersect?” (I am not inventing this.) Grim and sometimes silly as the show at the Mendel was, it was no match for “La Peinture comme crime.” First prize for pretentiousness goes to the Louvre for wall texts like parodies of modishly disjunctive deconstructionist academic discourse. “And this aggressive whirlpool destroys the old postulates of Western art, founded on the primacy of the pictorial genre” was typical. Even my most intellectual French friends found them a bit much. Foucault, Lessing, Winckelmann, Bataille, Kafka, Lacan, and Adorno, among others, were invoked to explicate a selection of works—very few of them paintings, despite the show's title—ranging from feverish nineteenth-century romantic drawings and sculptures to videos by obscure Viennese “actionists” of the late 1960s, performing gratuitously unappetizing rituals that gave new meaning to the word “*schmierkunst*.” Sections labeled “Vision,” “Fiction,” and “Action,” were then divided into such subheadings as “Carstens or the threat of the cry,” “Canova: journal of crisis,” “Romney or the forbidden body,” and my personal favorite—devoted to William Blake—“l'absolu du mal(e).”

“La Peinture comme crime” began with the remarkable news that the conception of dispassionate ideal classical beauty beloved of the academies was sometimes challenged by artists who otherwise endorsed academic values. (That was what was meant by “vision.”) What these artists did can be read as anticipating Surrealism (“fiction”) and, ultimately, cynical “post-Auschwitz” anti-art (“action”). Or something like that. Essentially, the exhibition seemed designed to provide a pedigree for those Austrian “actionists” who, the organizers believe, merit far more acclaim than they now enjoy. It

seems to have come as a revelation to the curators that both neoclassicists and romantics (especially some of the less gifted ones) produced images remarkable for their over-heated histrionics and inadvertent or thinly disguised references to kinky sex. Once the curators recovered from their surprise, however, they realized that these perverse eighteenth- and nineteenth-century practitioners were the ancestors of the Austrian actionists. And so were such visionaries as Fuseli, Goya, and Redon, and, closer to the present, “transgressive” artists such as Magritte, Yves Klein, Pollock—“*le dripping est un performance*”—and, natch, Bill Viola. (Amazingly, Bruce Nauman was not coopted to this lineage.) The historical overview was punctuated by movie clips ranging from Feuillade’s silent thriller *Fantômas* to Godard’s *Breathless*. The real clincher in establishing the Viennese actionists as “the most radical movement of the postwar period, because of its symbolic violence and real pornography,” was meant to be the inclusion of excerpts from newsreels of the liberation of Dachau and Auschwitz and a slow pan of an abandoned camp today. This was to remind you of Adorno’s contention that “art was impossible after Auschwitz,” a notion that, you will be relieved to hear, the curators don’t entirely support. They believe that art remains possible, but has become “cynical: the last stage in its degeneration in a world alienated by the fetishizing of merchandise.”

At the entrance to the show, just before a rotunda with huge projections of some of the more graphic performance videos, in which paint mercifully substituted for bodily fluids, the curators offered the helpful warning that “the nature of certain images in the exhibition ‘La Peinture comme crime’ may shock the feelings of young viewers.” What about the intellectual sensibilities of mature viewers? Rather than being shocking, though, most of the works on view were simply dismal. There were exceptions, most notably a wonderful group of Goya’s most gestural, uninhibited preparatory drawings and a superb, comprehen-

sive selection of Redon’s ravishing, mysterious lithographs. The presence of the Goya drawings and the Redon prints almost made up for the rest of the exhibition—which is saying a great deal. Otherwise, it’s hard to decide just what was most offensive about the show: its concept, its texts, or its equation of wrenching images of newly liberated victims of the camps with the mindless videos of the Austrians’ “actions.” For sheer stupidity, though, it’s hard to beat the installation. As in the Nouvel show, the exhibition spaces were very dark, with brilliant light focused only on the exhibited works, which had the effect of homogenizing surfaces and somehow destroying scale. Presented this way, the Pollocks, which were not prime examples to start with, flattened out and turned into backlit signs—in the commercial, not the semiotic sense. I wish I could shake a horrible premonition that this is the future of museology.

Happily, an antidote to all this was available at the Musée D’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris—a.k.a. the Palais de Tokyo—in the form of a survey of the work of Giorgio Morandi (October 4, 2001–January 6, 2001), organized by the Tate and shown there earlier in the year. Entitled simply “Giorgio Morandi” in London, in Paris the exhibition was given the subtitle “Dans l’écart de réel” (“variation on, or divergence from, the real”). Like all Morandi shows, indeed like Morandi himself, this one had its ardent champions and detractors. “Repetitious,” “superb,” “disappointing,” I heard, from people whose eyes I usually trust on both sides of the channel. It made me all the more curious.

Morandi, the enigmatic Bolognese, is, of course, a true “painter’s painter,” an artist who, like his hero Cézanne, made no effort to please or ingratiate, but stubbornly devoted himself to probing a deceptively narrow range of questions about the relationship of perception and invention. Tiny variations of color or of composition, small nudges of drawing out of true, minute vibrations at the meeting of edges count for a

lot in Morandi, turning his hermetic tabletop world into something far larger and mysterious. Yet unlike Cézanne, who demands that you pay attention to him because his works—even his most disciplined—seem to wrench themselves off the wall through the combined power of their formal innovation and their force of feeling, Morandi is deliberately, perhaps calculatedly, self-effacing, presenting himself as the most reticent and guarded of modern painters. Not that his work is cold or empty. Quite apart from the restrained sensuality of his paint handling—that brushy deposit of just the right amount of dense, slightly recalcitrant pigment—the singlemindedness of Morandi's vision can make those ordinary bottles and boxes, those banal dishes seem overwhelmingly poignant, like surrogates for figures enacting existential dramas. Or perhaps, given Morandi's habitual deployment of a particular group of objects—a pitcher, a *caffè latte* bowl, a box, a ribbed vase, and so on—it might be more accurate to describe these dramas as a solemn *commedia dell'arte*, a ritualized theater of stock characters and varied plots.

Morandi's work is almost always more interesting to see in groups than in isolation, since then the subtle differences between even closely related pictures become evident. Seen one at a time, the “series” paintings in which he minimally altered the set-up by adding or subtracting a single object or minutely shifting placement can seem like obsessive repetitions of an identical composition. But when closely related pictures are brought together, it becomes plain that each realignment is in fact a complex rethinking of spatial relationships that demanded shifts in tone, color, and—what is more surprising—changes in the size and proportion of each canvas. (Something very similar obtains in the work of that other keen-eyed, soft-spoken master of the intimate still life, Chardin, to whom Morandi has often been compared.) None of this reveals itself rapidly. You have to look hard.

The show at the Louvre was intended to demonstrate the innate abstractness of

Morandi's pictures, particularly in the works he produced between about 1950 and his death in 1964—works that, according to the British press release, “can be read as arrangements of pure form” and that, according to the French one, “reveal the artist's use of a specific and limited typology of shapes.” I expected an exhibition that would demand concentration and would reward the effort by clarifying nuances. Did I get one? Well, yes and no—at least in relation to the show as installed in Paris. (I missed the original version at the Tate.)

Any exhibition that assembles more than eighty first-rate paintings and drawings by Morandi is bound to be a pleasure. He may be represented in major museums, and in recent years a few institutions, mostly in Italy, have exhibited his paintings in some depth, but the majority of his work remains in far-flung public and private collections throughout Europe. At the Palais de Tokyo, the works on paper were particularly well chosen: a range of economical pencil drawings, mostly still lifes, with the occasional bare-bones landscape, that provided real insight into the painter's approach. You could follow the immediacy of Morandi's hand and the ferocity of his scrutiny. Detached bits of blunt line, at once tremulous and assured, and evenhanded shading became shorthand indicators of the volume of his familiar objects, of their profiles, or of the spaces between them. At times, the objects seemed massive to the point of monumentality, despite the spareness of Morandi's drawing; at other times, they disintegrated into disembodied fragments or frail punctuation of a surrounding void.

Individually, it would be hard to fault the canvases in the show. Apart from a schematic introductory section consisting of one severe, geometric painting from 1918 (when Morandi was briefly part of the Metaphysical movement, exhibiting with de Chirico and Carrà, sharing their ideas about the symbolic role of objects, and adopting their careful brand of illusionism) plus some

still lifes from the late 1930s and the 1940s, the show concentrated on paintings from the 1950s and early 1960s. This may be the period of Morandi's greatest strength, when he produced many of his most economical and delicately adjusted images. (It was also one of the most prolific periods in his forty-six-year career, probably because in 1953 he retired as Professor of Etching at the Bologna Academy of Fine Arts, a post that he had held since 1930, to devote himself entirely to painting.)

Picture after picture in the exhibition showed Morandi at his best, transforming his habitual cast of characters into astonishing arrangements of minimally inflected, ambiguous shapes. They seem at once to glorify the quotidian and to reinvent the entire tradition of Euclidian geometry. Both austere and sensuous, these pictures revealed all of Morandi's restrained, close-valued palette—a range of bleached earth-tones and dulled rococo pastels—chalky hues seemingly distilled equally from the dusty colors of the streets and rooftops of Bologna and the Emilian countryside and from the Renaissance frescos that the young Morandi traveled to study. Some pictures, all sober grays, off-whites, and murky tans, seemed almost colorless, until your eye adjusted to take in their unpredictable polychromy. Others seemed rich, but muffled, like once sumptuous, but faded fabric. In part, it's the dryness of Morandi's paint that subdues his color, but it also allowed him to give full rein to his willful touch. His paint retains every gesture of his brush, providing graphic evidence of the painter's role in disposing pigment and forcing you to pay attention to surface. That each brushstroke is a little large for the object it conjures up further detaches the mark from description. This is part of what makes Morandi modern and part of what suggests that, his devotion to particular objects notwithstanding, replicating the seen was always secondary to “abstract” structures and material expressiveness.

The materiality of Morandi's work is what links him most closely with Cézanne

and separates him most clearly from Chardin. Cézanne's still lifes depend on a struggle between tonal adjustments that powerfully suggest mass and bulk and an insistent rhythm of marks that just as powerfully calls attention to the autonomy of each deliberate touch of the brush. Morandi's paintings are similarly enlivened by the tension between a potent but non-literal evocation of particular objects and the fact of pigment on a surface. In Morandi's pictures, as in Cézanne's, paint is first and foremost paint, never an imitation of some other substance. In Chardin's work, however, no matter how rough or free his handling, paint always coexists with convincing illusionism. Chardin's contemporaries, in fact, marveled at his ability to suggest the color and texture of fruit, crockery, glass, and the like, without dissembling the physical nature of his medium, although it's clear that the contrast of the physical properties of his motifs concerned him as much as their forms. Morandi, however, was so little interested in the surface particulars of his objects that he routinely painted his bottles and boxes before incorporating them into his still life set-ups, annihilating reflections and inflections, and turning transparent glass and opaque tin alike into impenetrable solids. Other objects—earthenware and china bowls, opaline glass vases, paper flowers—seem to have been chosen in the first place for their matte surfaces. And the all-encompassing layer of dust that startled every visitor to Morandi's monastic bedroom/studio had a further dampening, neutralizing effect on the objects it blanketed.

Given the number of fine paintings in the show, why then did I have reservations about it? In part because the curators' tight focus on “works that can be read as arrangements of pure form”—and even more specifically on works including objects that figure in one still life belonging to the Tate—meant that landscapes and urban views got short shrift. Admittedly, Morandi painted far fewer landscapes and urban pic-

tures than he did still lifes, but they are no less important to an understanding of his approach and his achievement. The environs of the family apartment where he lived from the age of ten, like the landscape and buildings of Grizzana, where he and his family periodically retreated from 1913 on, were as familiar to Morandi as the objects piled on the tables of his Via Fondazza room—even if he did observe the landscape through binoculars from the security of his workplace. He treated the circumscribed views from his city bedroom/studio and the geometric houses, fields, and trees of the Emilian countryside no differently than he did his bottles and bowls. In his still lifes he stressed underlying forms and eliminated anecdotal surface details; in his landscapes, he emphasized geometry and essential relationships of tone and color, ignoring the variable textures of foliage or stuccoed walls. The few landscapes and Via Fondazza pictures in the show were a welcome relief, but much more could have been made of their seamless relationship with the still lifes; only one rather obvious pairing—of a 1952 still life featuring a sharply angled tabletop and a slanting shadow with a 1961 Grizzana landscape of a steep diagonal of scribbled foliage bisecting a rosy wall—hinted at these connections.

In addition, the selection of still life paintings emphasized only a single type of composition, one in which Morandi ganged his objects together, compressing them into a floating block of overlapping shapes within the rectangle of the canvas. The block can be centralized, pushed to one side, pulled away from the viewer, or pushed forward, but it always declares itself as a tight node of incident within the constricted space bounded by the edges of the picture. Morandi organized many paintings this way, but he clearly had no formula for composing. Yet only a few of the show's more loosely strung paintings of the 1940s and the wide-ranging selection of drawings gave any indication of the variety of ways with which he chose to put pictures together.

Repetition—of subject, of objects, even of composition—is undeniably part of what Morandi is about, so the show's narrow focus was not the whole explanation for the faintly unsatisfying quality of the French version of the exhibition. The installation was also part of the problem. In London, I'm told, related pictures were grouped in intimate spaces, but in Paris the show was widely spaced in ample galleries. While the relative isolation of each picture made it look important and encouraged contemplation, the distance between works made it too difficult to compare similar paintings or to appreciate fully the disparities of dissimilar ones. More disturbing, the occasional pair of "series" pictures was separated by unrelated images, effectively subverting the strongest statements of the show's theme. As I've said, given the general excellence of the individual works in the show, it seems churlish to complain, but a more thoughtful installation would have made the exhibition even more powerful.

But since I'm complaining, I should note that neither the British nor French exhibition catalogue is particularly edifying. Many of the color plates are muddy and/or wildly inaccurate; the creamy yellow background in a 1947–48 still life becomes a dingy tan, the rose-pink wall of that 1961 Grizzana landscape with the steep diagonal a nondescript beige. A good deal of space is also given to contemporary artists' statements about Morandi, ranging from the adulatory to the self-serving. But that's a detail. Seeing so many good Morandis, so many of them from collections difficult of access, was cause for rejoicing. And in comparison to most of the other shows in Paris at the time, "*Dans l'écart du réel*" was a model of clear thinking and aesthetic discrimination.

Of course, the Musée D'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris was not entirely exempt from the kind of modish, irritating show endemic to the city this winter. Elsewhere in the museum, "*Traversées*," a loose-limbed assembly of multimedia installations and videos, explored the problems of globaliza-

tion, travel, dislocation, cultural intersections, and all the rest of it. Every once in a while, a video demanded that attention be paid, but otherwise the show had the usual longueurs and calculated shock elements. A piece consisting of two pairs of bare legs protruding through holes in a wall (eat your heart out, Robert Gober) was engaging in ways that I suspect the perpetrator never imagined; I kept worrying about the comfort of the performers and wondering if they could read on the job. But if you persisted to the end of the labyrinth of “Traversées,” the last room of the exhibition was devoted to a strangely compelling film by Marine Hugonnier, a tribute to a Czech pianist and Holocaust survivor, Anna Hanusova, shown broadcasting a plaintive piece called *Für Alina* by Arvo Pärt. The camera moved at a leisurely pace through the sound studio, sometimes coming close to the intense, introspective pianist or zeroing in on her worn but supple hands, before abandoning her for landscape images. The result was surprisingly touching, an exercise in contained emotion and carefully crafted simplicity that had unexpected resonance with the Morandi show at the other end of the museum. As I said, despite the rigors of the past season’s exhibitions in Paris, there were occasional rewards.

Exhibition notes

“Inheriting Cubism: The Impact of Cubism on American Art, 1909–1936,”
at Hollis Taggart Galleries, New York.
November 28, 2001–January 12, 2002

The widespread ignorance of early American modernism is not at all surprising, what with the current fads for Americana and the saturated fats of Norman Rockwell and Maxfield Parrish. Still, by forgetting the contributions of Americans, we distort not only our understanding of American art but we also constrain our pleasures, for the American modernists gave us some of our most gratifying paintings. In recent years,

Hollis Taggart has not allowed the gallery-going public to forget these artistic forebears, mounting a series of gorgeous, synthesizing historical shows unequaled by other galleries in New York.

Curated by Stacey Epstein, Taggart’s Associate Director of Modernism, “Inheriting Cubism” traced the burgeoning styles of modernism, which were touched to varying degrees by Cubism, from their first appearance in this country until the Museum of Modern Art’s 1936 exhibition “Cubism and Abstract Art”—by which time, as John Cauman points out in his catalogue essay, “Cubism had become an art of the museums.” Despite the presence of a number of outstanding works among the forty paintings, drawings, and watercolors on view, one can hardly escape the judgment that in America modernists comprised a minor school. *Minor* in the highest sense of the word, but these artists still inherited their styles, rather than originating them. Even the standouts, Max Weber, John Marin, and Alfred Maurer, all of whom created excellent paintings, could not fully transcend the influences of Cézanne, Matisse, and Picasso. The exception, I think one might agree, is Stuart Davis—not one of my favorite painters, but the lone figure among the group to digest his European precursors fully and, in doing so, establish an entirely new, American concomitant to European modernism. While his early *President* (1917) retains familiar elements of gridded, stained-glass Synthetic Cubism, Davis’s *Gasoline Tank* (1930) and *Landscape with Drying Sails* (1931–32) assimilate the flatness, facetings, and overlapping planes of Cubism, and introduce a distinctly American sensibility, a predilection for blocky, easily identifiable elements, for signage and the evidence of labor, for discrete planes of strong color and a graphic sense of pictorial space. I suspect that part of what held back many of these artists from more significant stylistic breakthroughs (their aesthetic achievements need no defense) derives from the influence of the “Salon” Cubism of Metzinger, Gleizes, Duchamp, et al., with whose work they had

a greater familiarity than that of Braque and Picasso. And, of work by Salon Cubists, none had a more pernicious influence than Marcel Duchamp's third-rate *Nude Descending a Staircase*, No. 2.

"The story of American Cubism begins with Max Weber," writes Cauman. "Inheriting Cubism" fittingly includes eight very fine canvases of his work, from *Two Figures* (1910), his homage to Picasso's *Three Women*, and *The Bird* (1914), with its spare, art-nouveau verticality and Matissean patterns, to the chaotic brilliance of *Woman in Tents* (1913). In addition to work by better-known painters, including a tantalizing Gorky, a wholly abstract canvas by Marsden Hartley, a clunky and not particularly accomplished painting by Man Ray, a number of Alfred Maurer's distinctive Cubist works, a typical Joseph Stella, and a single Marin watercolor, the exhibition reintroduces a host of less famous artists: Patrick Henry Bruce, Arthur B. Carles, John Covert, Arthur B. Davies, Manierre Dawson, Earl Horter, Blanche Lazzell, H. Lyman Sayen, Jan Matulka, and Morton Schamberg.

Useful as it is in recounting the history of American Cubism, Cauman's catalogue essay has a number of failings, which, when supporting an historical show, ought to be pointed out. Typos—including a misattribution of Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* to Picasso, as well as the claim that Walter Arensberg acquired the work in 1919, while, on the facing page, a Charles Sheeler photograph, circa 1918, clearly shows the work hanging in Arensberg's living room—and toneless academic prose mar what ought to be the enjoyable experience of reading it. As I noted, Cauman does an excellent job of teasing out the influences of Salon Cubism from that of Cubism's founders, but other movements receive decidedly less attention. The influence of German Expressionism on, for instance, Marsden Hartley or on Oscar Bluemner's color-charged *Little Falls, New Jersey* (1911–17) remains unexplored. Cauman doesn't mention Precisionism once, despite the inclusion of Charles Demuth's Precisionist *Sail*:

In Two Movements (1919) and Stella's *American Landscape (Gas Tank)* (1918). Nevertheless, these are minor faults in a show of major importance and exquisite satisfactions.

—Daniel Kunitz

Shahzia Sikander in
"Conversations with Traditions,"
at Asia Society, New York.
November 17, 2001–February 17, 2002

Virtually every "advanced" artist today—those who regularly turn up in biennials and mid-career retrospectives—works in a pluralistic, though recognizable, international style, generally installations or certain types of less-than-heartfelt paintings or short, impenetrable art films and videos. It makes no difference whether they be German, Brazilian, Chinese, French, or American—their style is a rehashing of Western successes from the last forty-odd years. And so it is with a pleasure akin to exhaling after holding one's breath for a long time that I recommend Shahzia Sikander, a contributor to the 1997 Whitney Biennial and one of twenty-one artists profiled in the recent PBS program "Art: 21."

Born in Pakistan and trained there in traditional Indian and Persian miniature painting, the thirty-two-year-old Sikander, who also holds a master's degree from the Rhode Island School of Design, now lives in the United States. Unlike her taste-following contemporaries, who, at least in practice, tend to scorn traditions more aged than themselves, Sikander operates with a much older and certainly older-fashioned notion of originality—the extension of an ancient tradition. In her most arresting efforts, she paints miniatures, employing timeworn techniques and materials, combining conventional Persian and Indian iconography with modern imagery and updated narratives. Indeed, her entire output to date can be summed up as a series of variations on the balance and confrontation between tradition and actuality, Western

and Eastern, the recent and the remote. That said, she rarely allows extra-artistic concerns to undermine the aesthetic force of her work. "For me," she writes, "art is not a conduit to politics, feminism, or religion. It is a ticket to experience." Her cowboy-boot mandalas and airplanes flying over Hindu goddesses are neither strident calls for political reform nor pleas for some hazy multicultural utopia; rather they are icons of her experience, episodes in delightfully lighthearted, whimsical stories.

Dominating the small showing of works on paper at the Asia Society is Sikander's *The Scroll* (1991–92), a narrative masterpiece in vegetable color, dry pigments, watercolor, and tea on hand-prepared *wasli* paper, of approximately 13 x 64 inches. Scenes of life in what must be a Pakistani home unfold across a paper divided by several borders—a single blue line, a wider strip marbled in tan and light brown, and a geometric pattern of interlocking triangles in white and gray. Roofs and trees break through above and below, so that the imagery seems to thrust out beyond the picture plane. A ghostly, translucent woman with dark hair and flowing white garments leads the viewer through the rooms of the house and its exterior spaces, where quotidian events occur: a woman tries to rescue a cat dropped from a window; a man in Western apparel lies on the floor reading a newspaper, with a pillow propped under his head; another man in Western dress sits in a chair outside, on a patio of orange hexagonal tiles, talking to the shade-like protagonist, who sits in a cage-like hanging chair; a woman crouches before a refrigerator in the modern kitchen, searching for something to eat, while, across a courtyard, a traditionally dressed group stands by a table spread with a customary meal. The story ends outdoors, with the ghost-woman simultaneously painting her own portrait—on an easel—and sitting for the portrait.

So many hues, patterns, incidents, and characters appear in *The Scroll*, one hardly knows what to praise first. Suffice it to say, Sikander's attention to detail, her sense of muted colors juxtaposed or washing into one another, her rendering of people and architectural elements, and her *intimiste* handling of pattern all attest to Sikander's thorough training and her uncowed approach to life in the fullness of its manifestations. Her ingenious use of perspective is particularly notable; the linear movement of the picture is halted throughout by perpendicular perspectives that lead both to recessed spaces and images that push out toward the viewer.

Not all the works on view were so resolutely bound to narrative. *Spaces in Between* (1995) is more abstract, more succinctly iconographic than the other, busier works. Here a white veil with a single eye peeping out floats against a tea-stained ground, connected on either side by white strands to a white rectangle imprinted with topographic lines in fingerprint whorls and to a circular passage in green, pink, red, blue, and white. Adept as she is as a painter, Sikander is equally astonishing as a draughtsman. *Park Kingdoms* (2001), in graphite and tinted black ink, depicts two lovers: a woman in traditional clothing intertwined with a man wearing a reversed baseball cap and a shirt with "Butter" written on it.

Sikander's recent forays into digital technology and drawing on album covers evince a somewhat troubling capitulation to contemporary relevance, though the pleasing, if somewhat stilted, results argue that she is experimenting, rather than turning her back on the qualities she has used to great effect until now. Young and possessing extraordinary talent, Sikander revivifies old techniques and brings to her adopted country a much-needed infusion of the new instead of the merely novel.

—Daniel Kunitz

Music

New York chronicle

by Jay Nordlinger

Valery Gergiev is a man about New York, the principal guest conductor of the Metropolitan Opera, a sometime guest conductor of the Philharmonic, a frequent visitor and presence. Some say he'll succeed James Levine as music director of the Met, should "Jimmy" ever decide to step down; if this comes to pass, the Met will not exactly have traded up. Gergiev has delivered some excellent, even memorable performances: one thinks of a *Khovanshchina* (Mussorgsky's opera) and a *Gambler* (Prokofiev's). But he has also delivered performances that were either undistinguished or downright inept: a Shostakovich Sixth with the Philharmonic was almost shocking, given the man's acclaim. (Some critics contend that he is formidable in the Russian repertory, weak outside it; I myself have not found this the case, either way.) Gergiev is one of those hit-or-miss musicians, not unlike the pianist Martha Argerich, whom the public also adores. If nothing else, it makes attendance at their concerts something of an adventure.

Gergiev is certainly interesting for the public to look at (though, in music, this should be neither here nor there). A critic friend of mine cracked that he looks like Yul Brynner in *Once More with Feeling*, a 1960 comedy about a conductor. Gergiev is seen as kind of a mad magician, with his dark, forbidding looks and his wild gyrations. He sways and bends and lurches, and his hands flutter about. Leopold Stokowski, by comparison, was encased in one of those Han-

nibal Lecter body suits. Theatrics on the podium seldom serve the music; but then, every case is individual, and a conductor does what he thinks he must to obtain the results he desires. Gergiev's podium style should not be held against him, but neither should it be counted in his favor.

In mid December, the conductor took up residence in Carnegie Hall with the Kirov Orchestra, the institution with which he has made his fame, and the better part of his recordings. He—and they—gave no fewer than four concerts, featuring almost exclusively Russian music. I will consider only one of them, all Rachmaninoff. It began with *The Isle of the Dead*. This is one of the great, evocative music-pictures in the whole of the Romantic orchestral repertory. When handled with care, it is spooky, haunting, and sometimes chilling. The Kirov presented a relatively coarse, rough sound, which isn't necessarily a bad thing, and to be expected—even welcomed—from an east-of-the-Danube orchestra. Gergiev's approach to the piece was quite blunt, lacking in mystery. The *Isle* ought to cast a spell, and yet Gergiev's rendering was too obvious and too big for that. This is a piece that must *build*, layer upon layer. When the climax came, it was hardly a climax at all, because Gergiev had been too blunt and big, had spent too much. The performance lacked polish and precision, but, worse, it lacked musical intuition.

The soloist for the evening was the Rus-

sian émigré pianist Vladimir Feltsman, who did the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*. Feltsman is a worthy pianist of great seriousness and command. He played a minor part in Cold War cultural politics, applying to leave the Soviet Union in 1979 and thereby being banned from public performance. In 1986, shortly before he was to play a private recital at the American ambassador's in Moscow, "someone" vandalized the piano. When Feltsman finally won release from the USSR in 1987, he played a recital at the White House—his first performance in North America.

In the Rachmaninoff, Feltsman displayed a rich and solid tone; his playing had iron and depth to it. But it was sometimes too heavy, not fleet enough—a bit lead-footed. This was not limpid or impish playing, which is desirable in the *Rhapsody*, nor was it particularly elegant. But there was a markedness and authority about his performance. And it is to his credit that he takes the work with complete seriousness, not regarding it as a showpiece to be tossed off. He was individualistic in rhythm, without violating the composer's meaning. He understood what he, as the pianist, wanted to accomplish, in rhythm, color, and phrasing. Strangely, this wasn't a very Russian performance, on anyone's part; it was rather Germanic. This seems unlikely, given that everyone on the stage was a Russian, but it was so.

The latter half of the program was devoted to the Second Symphony, one of the most beloved symphonies ever written, and rightly so. When we think of this symphony, we tend to think of an exceptionally lush and beautiful sound—the Philadelphia Sound, for example (for both Stokowski and Eugene Ormandy loved this music and this composer). But Kirovian coarseness had a certain, savage appeal; this was, aurally, a Second of peasants and ruffians. Gergiev exhibited one of his habitual problems: if you do everything full throttle, you don't really, when all is said and done, have a full throttle. He and his players didn't worry overmuch about clean entrances. But

the second movement was jolly, brisk, and bracing. The much-cherished Adagio—out of which a popular song ("Never Gonna Fall in Love Again") was made—had its sweep, its panting beauty, and a touch of wildness. The clarinet solo was adequately executed, but with an ugly, nasal sound. The final movement was all climax, in the accustomed Gergiev way. It was extremely fast. The ending was a rushed, sloppy mess. But the electricity couldn't be denied, and Carnegie Hall went mad.

Toward the end of the month, it was *Hänsel und Gretel* time at the Met. This is a "holiday favorite," along with *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, *The Nutcracker*, and a few others—but it is a winsome and brilliantly crafted show, fit for all seasons. Indeed, Humperdinck's little opera is, for my money, a minor masterpiece.

It deserved better from the Metropolitan Opera orchestra and the guest conductor, Charles Mackerras. The overture is a glorious, delightful, sumptuous thing, but Mackerras and the orchestra performed it dryly, limply, and indifferently. It seemed they didn't care at all. The playing had no technical coordination, no sincerity, no bloom. It was ragged, spiritless, and disappointing. One could scarcely believe that this was the same orchestra that had performed so precisely and blazingly the night before, in Richard Strauss's *Die Frau ohne Schatten* under the young German conductor Christian Thielemann.

The title roles were taken by Dawn Upshaw, soprano, and Jennifer Larmore, mezzo-soprano, two popular and accomplished American singers. The role of Gretel is practically made for Upshaw, as she enjoys being little-girl-like and hammy (as in, to name only one of many examples, Musorgsky's song-cycle *The Nursery*). She was most effective, however, when she was playing it, and singing it, rather straight. Unsurprisingly, she was cute as a button and a delicious actress. And one was reminded that her singing—in the upper register, in particular—can take on a liquid,

quivering quality, a feeling of high speed through the sound, absolutely thrilling.

Among Jennifer Larmore's gifts are strength, solidity, and accuracy. Her approach is usually no-nonsense, which makes her an especially fine Handelian. What was missing from her singing of *Hänsel*, however, was some caressing phrasing. Larmore, for all those gifts, is not really a creamy phraser. Humperdinck's music is good for both voice and soul, and Larmore might have savored it just a bit more. Her opening scene with Upshaw was rather flat and disappointing, in part because there was no bubbling energy from the pit; Mackerras and the orchestra continued their carelessness throughout. Later on, the exquisite prayer—the duet and “signature song” from the opera—was dangerously slow, but the two women handled it well, despite some flattening by Upshaw.

The mother, Gertrude, was sung by Stephanie Blythe, another American mezzo who is an excellent Handelian (and who has, in fact, just put out a distinguished album of arias from both Handel and Bach). She contributed her big voice and musical common sense, and she impersonated her simple character to a T. The father, Peter, was taken by Kim Josephson, an American baritone. He was a jovial, welcome presence, the sort of father we want in this opera.

But taking the cake—or gingerbread house—was the veteran Canadian mezzo Judith Forst, who sang the Witch. This was hardly a Witch to hiss: Forst was incredibly charismatic, full of life, full of a kind of sadistic joy, and a delight to watch and hear. If she had a problem, it was that she was too likable. She clearly had a ball that night, and she lifted the entire occasion.

It is not my practice to mention recordings in this column, but I cannot help remarking that I have always thought it a shame that the conductor André Cluytens's recording of this work—featuring the delectable twosome of Anneliese Rothenberger and Irmgard Seefried in the title roles—is so hard to find. The standard

recording of *Hänsel und Gretel* is Herbert von Karajan's, with two Elisabeths, Schwarzkopf and Grümmer. The Cluytens, though, is the one to dream about.

When it came time for the Met's *Don Carlo*—one of the grandest of Verdi's grand operas—who should be in the pit but the principal guest conductor, Gergiev? He handled the proceedings with technical competence, but long stretches of this impassioned opera were remarkably dull. There were moments, to be sure, that had tension and power. The masterly scene between King Philip and the Grand Inquisitor, for example, was well shaped, which is certainly in Gergiev's favor. But much of the performance was routine, listless, mediocre. How to square Gergiev's penchant for overexcitement with his equally marked tendency toward this dullness? A puzzle, Gergiev.

The soprano who began the performance was Galina Gorchakova, who should never have set foot on stage. She was clearly too sick to sing; at times, she was inaudible, and when she was audible, the effect was worse. Before the second act, a Met official announced her replacement, the Chilean soprano Veronica Villarroel. Gorchakova had done a disservice by giving it the old college try in the first place. This is neither heroic nor admirable, most of the time; instead, it is a form of self-indulgence and also disrespectful of the audience, who are, after all, paying customers. As for Villarroel, she sang acceptably. It is a curiosity about Spanish speakers that their accent in Italian is more pronounced, more conspicuous, than anyone else's, particularly on the *esses*. It surely has to do with the closeness of the languages.

The tenor was the Canadian Richard Margison, who in the first act was almost as off-putting as Gorchakova. He was dry, stuffy, and pinched, and none too musical; also, there was a hint of a bark (though this word is commonly associated with Wagner). Eventually, he warmed up—freed up—and acquitted himself honorably. The

timeless question posed by Marilyn Horne comes to mind: why don't they warm up beforehand, before exposing themselves to the public?

The baritone Dmitri Hvorostovsky sang Rodrigo, exhibiting his usual suaveté, musical intelligence, and command. His duet with Margison—one of the great “buddy,” or loyalty-oath, duets in all of opera, to go with another of Verdi's in *Otello*—was insufficiently stirring, but this was as much the fault of Gergiev as the singers. Irina Mishura was a praiseworthy Eboli, with a smoky bottom register and a ringing, interesting top. She even showed admirable flashes of coloratura. Her “O don fatale” was perhaps not in the Shirley Verrett league, but it was gutsy and true.

Laurels, however, must go to the low singers, starting with Samuel Ramey, who, as he did his monologues, reminded one and all that they were listening to, quite simply, one of the greatest basses of this or any other age. There is more wavering in the voice now, but, in the main, the years simply rolled off as he sang (Ramey is sixty this year). In this way, he reminds one of that other time-defying marvel, Plácido Domingo. The Inquisitor opposite Ramey's Philip was the Georgian bass Paata Burchuladze, who was astoundingly good. Coming from him was otherworldly, haunting, powerful, heartfelt, and house-shaking bass singing. The volume and quality of the voice were amazing, but the singing was quite sensitive as well. The sounds of Ramey and Burchuladze dueling, in a fashion, will not easily be forgotten.

Last, I might mention the continuing excellence of the Metropolitan Opera chorus, which was a significant player, especially in the first act, which was otherwise a wash-out. This chorus is one of the dependable pleasures of attending the Met, and that is no light thing.

At the beginning of January, Lincoln Center put on a Rachmaninoff festival, which is always a good idea—anytime, anywhere. A highly anticipated part of this festival was a

performance of the composer's *Vespers* by the St. Petersburg Chamber Choir in Park Avenue's Church of St. Ignatius Loyola. This choir has won world renown through its tours and recordings, and its founder and leader, Nikolai Korniev, is regarded as the very model of the modern Russian choirmaster. Their recording of the *Vespers* (Philips 42344) is graced by the brief but inspiring solo turn of Russia's prize mezzo-soprano, Olga Borodina.

In the church, Korniev's performance was not exactly one to ascend to. His was a surprisingly secular *Vespers*, with very fast tempos and sudden, dramatic dynamics, full of blood and passion. It was almost operatic, having some of the qualities of a Mutilled Verdi *Requiem*. You could say for it that at least it wasn't dainty or precious. But, as I mentioned earlier about *The Isle of the Dead*, this is the sort of piece—even more than that orchestral tone poem—that should cast a spell. It should envelop listeners in a haze of spirituality. This was an earthly, and earthy, performance, missing the twilight glow.

The mezzo soloist was dull and blunt, and badly flat. The tenor soloist—who is responsible for singing the beloved “Lord, let now Thy servant depart in peace,” which Rachmaninoff asked to be sung at his funeral—was thin and weak. The singing of the choir at large was often dutiful and mechanical; some of the attacks were faulty. This is not to say that the group is poorly trained or unprofessional; on the contrary, they exhibited a fair amount of polish and discipline. It may be that they have performed this, their signature piece—and the summit of Russian liturgical music—a little too often.

If there is the slightest doubt on the question of whether nationality is destiny, or whether nationality determines understanding, try the Californian Robert Shaw's recording of the *Vespers* (Telarc 80172), which *is* a performance to ascend to, if you're ready.

In the middle of January, the New York Philharmonic offered a boldly dancey eve-

ning. On the podium was the Briton Andrew Davis, and on the program were Ravel's *Valses nobles et sentimentales*, Kodály's *Dances of Galánta*, and Richard Strauss's *Rosenkavalier* Suite, with its whirling waltzes. To borrow a phrase, they could have danced all night.

The Ravel was correct and largely inoffensive, if not swimming in French froth, insouciance, and wistfulness. It was rather without energy—an undercurrent—and panache. Davis's tempos were on the slow side, which is fine, but the playing—or, better, the conducting—was a bit plodding. The Kodály was better, with the principal clarinetist, flutist, and oboist making fine gypsies. The *Rosenkavalier* Suite was even better than that: sumptuous, gay, alive, with the horn section whooping joyously, the strings invigorated, and Andrew Davis showing a real feeling for the rhapsodic part of Strauss's soul. This is a warhorse, the kind many critics roll their eyes over—but it can be made to gallop, as though for the first time. All that's required is musicianship.

Amidst all the dancing was the Lutoslawski Piano Concerto (1987–88), performed by the young Norwegian Leif Ove Andsnes. He is a critic's darling, a versatile player who

is celebrated for composers as diverse as Haydn, Liszt, and . . . well, Lutoslawski. He does two things that will endear him to critics forever, no matter what: he participates in chamber music and he plays contemporary music. No matter how well or badly he does, he is virtually assured raves and gratitude.

Which doesn't mean, of course, that he is an unworthy player: he is, in fact, creditable. The Lutoslawski is a clever and exciting work, to which Andsnes did justice. He is a supple, nimble pianist, who employs power when he needs it. At times his playing seemed too retiring, too muted, and slightly undaring. Yet part of this may be attributed to Avery Fisher Hall, which is a notorious swallower of sound. Always, Andsnes was tasteful and judicious. If to my mind he could have used more dash and vivacity, he at least afforded the ending its fabulous drive. And it would only be right to add that Davis—who often seems workaday—handled the score exceptionally well. As for the Philharmonic players, they laid on the brilliant virtuosity of which they're famously capable (but which they sometimes withhold).

And the Lutoslawski? This may well be a concerto that's here to stay.

Editor's note: We wish to call our readers' attention to the publication of *Facsimiles of Time: Essays on Poetry and Translation*, by Eric Ormsby (Porcupine's Quill, \$22.95), portions of which first appeared in *The New Criterion*.

Opera in New York

by Patrick J. Smith

Along with the numerous professional and semi-professional performances of opera in the New York area, the schools of music often present works that are interesting for their rarity. Such was the case at the Manhattan School on December 5, with a double bill of one-act operas by prolific composers, one written at the outset of a long career and one near the end.

Gian Carlo Menotti's *Amelia Goes to the Ball* (1937) was his first big hit, and it still retains its youthful insouciance. It can be argued that *Amelia* displays his genuine talent for comedy and parody more successfully than most of his subsequent works. It is inspired fluff: about a wife with the tenacity of an operatic diva who insists on going to the first big ball of the season. Of course, in the end, she gets her way (with the Chief of Police) after the Husband and Lover have been discarded. Menotti's music—resolutely tonal and indebted more to Ermanno Wolf-Ferrari than to Puccini—has a freshness that it would soon lose, and if the work is treated as a light-as-air trifle, it can succeed.

Robert Ward, whose distinguished career as an opera composer is highlighted by his version of Arthur Miller's *Crucible*, set to music the Edith Wharton short story *Roman Fever* in 1993. (He was then in his seventies; he is now in his vigorous eighties.) Ward's consummate gift for writing vocal music is ever in evidence in his handling of this tale of two women, meet-

ing in a Roman hotel after a lapse of some twenty years and recalling their first visit. Both their husbands are now dead, and they have each brought a daughter to Rome to undergo a similar introduction to the Eternal City. As the one-act opera develops, the daughters find suitors (as one of the mothers did), and the initial enthusiasm of the mothers at this unexpected reunion is strongly tempered as the facts of the original trip become evident. The last ten minutes or so of the opera play like the denouement of a detective story, with revelations and reversals, and culminate with one matron delivering to the other what is one of the great curtain lines in opera.

Ward's glorying in women's voices (the cast is just the four, plus a waiter) holds the opera together, though in truth its talkiness (unobjectionable in a literary context) needs some pruning. He has enlivened the opera, however, with a jazzy duet for the daughters (about to fly high in the sky with a couple of Italian aviators) and a ballad sung by the waiter. The strength of the last scene's revelations tie the work together and give it its distinction.

The contrasting duet of operas made for a strong evening, musically. David Gilbert conducted with sympathy for Menotti's jokes and for the lyricism of Ward's musical lines. Dorothy Grimley and Erin Smith were excellent as the matrons: delineating their individual characters through the music that Ward provided.

It is too bad that this kind of understatement did not accrue to Robin Guarino's direction. Alas, this is the Era of the Concept, and the "concept" here was the Roaring Twenties. *Amelia* was set (by Narelle Sissons) in a framed lightbox, peopled (in part) by bowler-hatted refugees from a Magritte, with everything over-produced, cluttered, mannered, and—not surprisingly—resolutely unfunny. When I saw that the director had decided to play through the delicious overture (which is a contemporary companion-piece to Barber's *School for Scandal* overture) with action (a couple of couplings), I knew we were in trouble; what subsequently ensued buried the butterfly of the opera under a ton of irrelevance. It also buried poor Amelia. Stephanie Barnett was forced to perform at a frenetic pace and did not have the diva-like singleness of purpose for the role. She could have put it forward more forcefully in a less hectic atmosphere.

Roman Fever, in this regard, suffered less, since the opera does not lend itself to over-production, but the bare-bones stage did little to suggest the magic of Rome (so important to the story) and treating the jazz episode as a Broadway production number was questionable in the context of the story.

The Met's recent revivals of *Die Meistersinger* and *Arabella*, both of which were mounted to display great stars in new roles, were beautifully reviewed by my colleague Jay Nordlinger in these pages last month, but I should like to touch on them again for a moment. The revival of *Meistersinger*, which I saw November on 20th, represented the first time that the great Wagnerian basso James Morris undertook the central role of Hans Sachs in New York. (He had previously performed it in San Francisco.) Morris is the pre-eminent Wotan of his generation, and it must be said that the voice—large as always—is of a grainier sound than it was five years ago, but thankfully Sachs does not require golden vocalism so much as a projection of humanity, understanding, and an encompassing wisdom that finally ennobles the work.

Morris is an intuitive artist, who works himself into a role by stages, rather than presenting it full-grown at once, yet I felt that his comprehension of Sachs, even at this stage of working with it, was deep. He projected an inner quiet of force (this is very difficult: all too often when lesser artists play Sachs this comes out as lassitude), so that it embraced others onstage, and his acceptance of the accolades of the citizens in Act III was without either pride or false modesty. His scene with Walther in that act, where he gently maneuvers the young man into entering the contest and, more importantly, into creating a Mastersong, was finely judged. Morris will only get better in the role; already it is a major achievement in his career.

The ostensible reason for the revival of the 1983 production of Strauss's late opera *Arabella*, which I saw in December, was Renée Fleming in the title role, but in fact the greatest pleasure of the evening was the conducting of Christoph Eschenbach. Eschenbach played the score with a stylish brio, which at times was brass heavy, but he has a sovereign understanding of the Strauss *melos*, so that the waltzes with which the score is littered spun effortlessly from the pit. The moonlit lyric moments—especially the celebrated close of the opera itself—were also expertly crafted.

Fleming sings a lovely *Arabella*, but what was missing—at least until the last act—was that sense of pride and individuality that sets her apart from her warm-hearted sister. Fleming has, however, studied the demanding role, and her grasp of it became ever clearer as she passed from the lovely scene of rejecting her suitors to the maturity of understanding that enables her to forgive her betrothed Mandryka.

The Met has been fortunate in its productions of Richard Strauss's large-scale opera *Die Frau ohne Schatten*. Their first production in the opening weeks of the new house at Lincoln Center was the sleeper hit of that season, boasting an almost ideal cast, stage magic unknown in the 39th Street house,

and the knowledgeable conducting of Karl Böhm.

But this December and January, the Met, if not quite managing to cap that climax (the earlier production having achieved iconic and exaggerated status), put forth a rendering that was strong in conception, almost faultless in detail, and unified by the cohesive hand of the young German hot-shot maestro Christian Thielemann. The long evening rightly brought down the house in an echo of the old “mad nights”—usually of Italian operas with Italian singers—that were a feature of the old house.

The strength of the production came from the director and costume and lighting designer Herbert Wernicke. He applied (lightly) a directorial concept on the sprawling tale, which not only managed to clarify it but also to make use of the inherent opportunities for stage “magic” with lavish lighting effects beyond anything I have heretofore seen at the Met.

Die Frau ohne Schatten is a symbolic fairy tale written by Hugo von Hofmannsthal. His libretto calls for actual magical moments: shining swords appearing out of nowhere, flying fish, and act-ending cataclysms. Wernicke transformed these into prosaic ones: the sword became a kitchen knife and there was no uproar (or magic boat) at the end of Act II. Wernicke kept the focus on the two couples at the center of the story: the Emperor and his new wife, and the Dyer Barak and his wife. The Emperor and Empress (she is the woman without a shadow) are otherworldly, far removed from the concerns of humans, while the Dyer and his wife—he good-hearted and simple, she fed up with a life of endless drudgery and yearning for glamour—are all too worldly. Wernicke visually contrasted them as strongly as possible, so that the royals played in an icy glitter of shadowless mirrors, blue and silver emptiness, while the humans struggled in a home that was a garbage dump of clutter, with dye-filled oil drums crowding out the communal bed. This contrast was made clear through the use of the Met’s upper and lower moveable

stages to juxtapose the upper and lower worlds of Hofmannsthal’s tale. The movement from one to the other was the real magic of the production, as well as Wernicke’s handling of his actors. The whole of the Dyer’s scene in the first act, in terms of stage movement, was one of the most accomplished sustained sequences of acting I have seen at the Met.

In the libretto, Hofmannsthal created another environment for the Empress to undergo the trials of earning her shadow (i.e., a sense of human compassion) in the third act: mountains through which water flows and a quiet spot with a golden fountain. Wernicke’s Manichean concept forbade this approach, and the third act was played in the frigid realm of the royals (with minor modifications) to its detriment. Yet so unyielding was Wernicke’s vision of the two realms that—allied to Deborah Voigt’s commanding performance as the Empress in this act—he was able to carry the story through to a “happy end.” The finish, which has been derided by many (“Its address is Sunset and Vine in Hollywood”) was at least partly redeemed by Wernicke’s decision, in keeping with both his concept and the opera, to return to the Dyer’s home at the very end. Life continues in the human world.

Another fine stroke of stagecraft was the personalization of the red falcon as a dancer in a flutter of red feathers. The falcon leads the Emperor to his supposed doom of being turned to stone and leads the Empress to salvation—it is a crucial aspect of the story, usually interpreted as a flicker of light, but here corporeal, real, and providing a warm color in the icy realm.

Die Frau ohne Schatten, in common with *The Magic Flute*, is a tale of maturation, wisdom, and understanding, and the development of character through verse is unusual in opera. It is dense (Hofmannsthal wrote a longer prose tale on the subject) but the stage telling simplifies the complexities, and Strauss’s music simplifies things even more. Strauss’s response to what Hofmannsthal gave him is direct, and if there is

little Wagnerian depth there is still much straightforward and beautiful music that lingers in the ear—for instance, the elaboration of the theme of Barak's Goodness in Act I, which was crafted with supreme care by Thielemann and the orchestra. Yet Strauss was unable to keep the same level of inspiration throughout, and stretches of weakness, particularly in Act III, make for difficult listening. Böhm always cut the work, I feel to its advantage, but Thielemann insists on every note, and even the undoubted talents of such a powerful Nurse (the evil figure) as Reinhild Runkel (she seems to sing it everywhere) is not sufficient to persuade.

I have never heard Thomas Moser (the Emperor) in better voice: this role, another of Strauss's infamous revenges on the tenor voice, was for once brought to its knees by the singer. Voigt has developed from year to year as a Strauss soprano: her gleaming instrument can now dominate the stage, while her always involved and persuasive acting showed the Empress's growing concern for the plight of the humans, especially in Act II, and gave meaning to the great moment in Act III when she rejects self for the benefit of others. It was a defining moment for the opera but also, I suspect, for Voigt as a Strauss singer.

Wolfgang Brendel, the Dyer, is past his

best days, unfortunately, but he was wisely chosen, for he projects a simple humanity in all he does onstage, and that is crucial to the opera. Gabriele Schnaut, as the Dyer's Wife, has the very taxing job of displaying an underlying goodness of soul while on the surface being thoroughly dissatisfied, petulant, and often downright perverse. Her characterization was not helped by a huge voice which, though effective and musical in soft singing, cuts like an enraged buzzsaw through the densest orchestration at full volume. Yet Schnaut is a more than capable actress and through her acting portrayed the positive sides of the woman that her voice contradicts.

A major share of the success of the evening was owing to Thielemann's control of all aspects of the music. That the Met orchestra can play the score is a given; that they played it with a tautness and propulsion is to Thielemann's credit. And yet I found his conception just a little too tight: his shaping of the Barak Goodness passage mentioned above was lapidary but not spontaneous or, finally, warm-hearted.

These are minor cavils. The Met has once again done justice to a work of stature and beauty, which, though flawed, does attempt to explore and understand the vagaries of the human heart.

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion*:

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The media

The charges & countercharges of self-righteous prigs

by James Bowman

The lead of *The New York Times*'s story about financial troubles at *The Irish Times* pays tribute to that paper as a "guide" to Hibernians doubtless bewildered by "the economic and cultural booms of the last decade." Brian Lavery, the article's author, could tell this by the "nonpartisan and unbiased approach" with which "*The Times* pushed issues to the fore with a progressive, literate, pro-European voice." It's a small example, I admit, but as perfect in its way as you will find of the way in which the subject of "bias" is understood, not only at *The New York Times* but also in most of the mainstream media in the United States. Just as, in the European context, "nonpartisan and unbiased" means practically the same in the eyes of Mr. Lavery and *The New York Times* as "progressive, literate, pro-European," so in the United States the same words imply the constellation of attitudes and opinions that go under the name (when they must be named at all) of "progressive."

It is the settled ambition of the "progressive" forces in the developed and English-speaking countries of the world to transcend what they regard as the parochialism of national and local identities. That is one reason why being "pro-European," for example, is the same thing to both *Timeses* as being unbiased. National or ethnic or religious or patriotic or other forms of feeling that do not aspire to the universal—these are what is meant by "bias." But to those "progressives" who inhabit their airy,

intellectual realm beyond all such provincial and partisan loyalties, charges of bias simply cannot apply. Conor Brady, the editor of *The Irish Times*, clearly sees his paper's mission in terms that resonate on 43rd street. According to Mr. Lavery:

Without *The Irish Times*, even Ireland's conservative mainstream, which often takes issue with the paper's liberal debates on gender relations, abortion and diversity, would feel the loss of the way it "tries to hold a mirror up to Irish society," Mr. Brady said. "It opens a window onto the world outside this island."

If you start from the assumption that conservative attitudes on "gender relations, abortion and diversity" are simply the result of ignorance of "the world outside this island," it follows that all your "debates" will be liberal ones. "Bias," like conservatism itself, can only be committed by those who are not cosmopolitans like Messrs. Brady and Lavery.

I only bring the matter up because it helps explain the emotional heat generated whenever the subject of bias comes knocking at the gates of America's citadels of journalistic rectitude. The latest to invite the pots of boiling oil on his head is Bernard Goldberg, a former reporter for CBS who went off the reservation in 1996 with an article on the editorial page of *The Wall Street Journal* which took to task Eric Engberg, a CBS colleague, for a sneeringly negative and

unbalanced report on Steve Forbes's "flat tax" proposal during that year's presidential primaries. According to Goldberg's new book,¹ previous internal protests of the network's biases had gone unheeded by CBS executives, and he was left with no recourse but to take his complaints public. As a result he was effectively banned by Dan Rather from further reporting for the "CBS Evening News" and frozen out by colleagues and CBS executives. What it was, exactly, that he continued working on at the network for the next five years is not made entirely clear in the book, but he was finally allowed to take early retirement last year when he turned fifty-five. Now he is free to air his grievances without restraint.

In writing his book, Goldberg was clever enough to confine his charges of bias to the network news shows. He reaped his reward for that with Janet Maslin's review in *The New York Times*:

Even among those who reject that premise [that network news personnel "tilt to the left"], or some of the *ad hominem* bitterness on display here, "Bias" should be taken seriously. Unlike Bill O'Reilly, whose best-sellers (like *The No-Spin Zone*) trumpet a bullying brand of conservatism as they recycle transcripts of television interviews, Mr. Goldberg has done real homework and has written a real book. Whatever his conclusions, however shaky his suppositions, he asks questions that are worth asking.

Unaccountably, she neglects to provide any examples of shaky suppositions to justify this kind of damning with faint praise, but the fact that it is praise at all doubtless owes something to the fact that the *Times*'s ox is ungored by an attack on the network news. The nearest she gets to a substantive criticism is the spectacular *non sequitur* of saying about his argument against the

foolish media hype in the late 1980s concerning the alleged threat of heterosexual AIDS that it "is weakened by what he leaves unsaid: that the condition of a person with AIDS is not improved by blaming the victim." What victim had he blamed? The only people blamed in his book are the lazy reporters who accepted at face value the assurances of the AIDS activists that the disease was as much a threat to heterosexuals, even children, as it was to the high-risk categories of homosexuals engaged in anal intercourse and intravenous drug users.

Chris Lehmann in *The Washington Post*'s "Book World" was less generous to Goldberg:

Unfortunately, Goldberg's apparently justified grievance against his CBS superiors—most particularly news anchor Dan Rather—supplies the template for his tour of the network news industry. As a result, the honorable dissent that midwifed "Bias" blurs almost immediately into a multifront crusade against high-profile media personalities that is, in truth, no better reasoned and no more balanced than the flat-tax report aired in 1996.

Once again, evidence of bad reasoning is rather thin on the ground. Lehmann writes that:

In his first 40 pages, for example, Goldberg revisits the original flap over his *Journal* op-ed to hammer out an unedifying portrait of stereotyped elite media clannishness. The network news is like the Mafia, he argues—only "The Don in this case is actually The Dan. Dan Rather. Capo di tutti news guys." A few sentences later, he floats this unlovely analogy: "If CBS News were a prison instead of a journalistic enterprise . . . 100 percent of the vice presidents would be Dan's bitches."

What he is objecting to here, of course, is not Goldberg's reasoning but his rhetoric, which is indeed rather overwrought and tasteless. He goes on to claim that Goldberg is attacking "this nameless congeries of 'elites,'" even though the book is full of

1 *Bias: A CBS Insider Exposes how the Media Distort the News*, by Bernard Goldberg; Regnery, 232 pages, \$27.95.

names, including that of Dan Rather which Lehmann himself has just quoted. He then tries with a bit of sophism to discredit not an argument but a hypothetical analogy of Goldberg's by suggesting that Nebraska is really no more conservative than New York. Just look at Bob Kerrey in the former and Michael Bloomberg in the latter!

Like Miss Maslin, Lehmann is predictably exercised by Goldberg's apparent belief in the social pathologies engendered by working mothers, but his evidence that this is not really the unreported story that Goldberg claims it is—namely that such pathologies as violent crime, suicide, and drug addiction among teens are decreasing—even if true would be irrelevant. Goldberg was writing about the fact that such evidence as there was to link the one thing to the other had never been reported by television news, so that there had never been a discussion of a subject which, even if it turned out to be, as Lehmann avers, “not much of a story” (and the evidence for this is weak), deserved to be discussed.

I am not against “better day care,” and I have no problem with the evening news doing stories about how that might be done [writes Goldberg]. The problem is that they don't let the other voices on. The ones who say that most toddlers are better off with their own mothers than with day-care workers and that most adolescent kids would do better if a parent were home after school instead of being alone and “fending for themselves.”

In other words, his argument is not about day care versus home care. It is about balance and fairness on the news. It is about a genuine diversity of opinion.

This is just one of many occasions on which the more vehemently the journalistic establishment insists that Goldberg is wrong the more obvious it is to any fair-minded observer that he is right. If bias were really, as they say it is, not a problem, they would not be so obviously threatened by someone who says it is a problem. Par-

ticularly someone who says so not from the right but from the liberal journalistic culture itself. Hence the appalling disingenuousness of Bob Schieffer, who was quoted by Howard Kurtz of *The Washington Post* as saying of Goldberg that “In the end, he seemed to think his job was to report on CBS News instead of reporting for CBS News. . . . Bernie just seemed to be upset about everything. He was upset with the world.” Nor did Eric Engberg, whose report on Steve Forbes six years ago started the whole business, have the sense to keep his mouth shut, telling Kurtz that Goldberg had committed an “act of treason” and that “he didn't have many friends in this organization because he was a selfish, self-involved guy who was not a team player.”

There, no doubt, was another example of Engberg's celebrated lack of bias! But wouldn't any network newsmen similarly expect to have his character assessment of an avowed enemy taken at face value? How dare we question his motives? The fact that Engberg thinks himself qualified to offer such an observation on such a subject itself tells us a lot about the justice of Goldberg's charge against him.

But if Schieffer, another CBS employee, and Engberg have some cause of grievance against Goldberg, what are we to make of the vitriol of Tom Shales—not, interestingly, in *The Washington Post*, where he is the resident television critic but in the relative obscurity of the web-site *emonline*?

Disgruntled has-beens everywhere have a new hero and role model: Bernard Goldberg, the one-time CBS News correspondent and full-time addlepatented windbag who is trying to make a second career out of trashing his former employer. Goldberg has picked this moment in time to haul out the old canard about the media being “liberal” and the news being slanted leftward.

It's the first refuge of a no-talent hack, that argument, and about as old as the printing press; in fact, wasn't poor old Gutenberg denounced in some circles as a heretic and a radical?

Wow! Talk about protesting too much! Whence comes this intemperate and excessive *ad hominem* language in an attempt to discredit a general argument about the TV news? He goes on to refer to “Goldberg’s laughably inept hate campaign” (*hate campaign?*), adding that “Goldberg was not only a flop as a network correspondent, he’s a lousy writer besides.” Naturally, we wait for the payoff. Let’s see this “laughably inept” instance in which Goldberg reveals himself as a “lousy writer.” Well, here it is:

Quoting Engberg as having referred to one aspect of the Forbes plan as being its “wackiest,” Goldberg then asked in rhetorical high dudgeon, “Can you imagine, in your wildest dreams, a network news reporter calling Hillary Clinton’s health care plan ‘wacky?’ Can you imagine any editor allowing it?”

Well, frankly, yes. But Hillary Clinton and Steve Forbes were not on an equal plane. She was first lady of the land and he was a national non-entity trying desperately to draw attention to his failing bid for a presidential nomination.

Memo to Tom Shales: Do you really believe that (1) saying you can imagine the word “wacky” applied to Mrs. Clinton’s health care plan by a network newsman without citing any example of anyone who actually did so constitutes a putdown of Goldberg? and that (2) it is an answer to his charge that Engberg did not treat Forbes fairly to say that Forbes was “a national non-entity trying desperately to draw attention to his failing bid for a presidential nomination”? Goldberg, in other words, is an “addlepated windbag” for accusing Engberg of insulting Forbes because, well, because Forbes had it coming to him! I wonder who it was who told Tom Shales he was qualified to call somebody else a lousy writer?

Perhaps we should make allowances for a history of personal enmity between Shales and Goldberg? After all, the former tells us of his own “unpleasant experience with Goldberg.” This was a “mish-moshy” op-ed by the latter in *The New York Times*,

in which he quoted from TV reviews by me and by John J. O’Connor, then the *Times* TV critic, and because we apparently agreed about one program, Goldberg from this drew the conclusion that all TV critics write as a monolith and agree with each other all the time.

We can only imagine how “unpleasant” it is for Tom Shales to find himself being compared to John J. O’Connor. And maybe Goldberg *was* guilty of the “patently preposterous contention” that “all TV critics write as a monolith.” But as Shales quotes no sentence, word, or syllable of Goldberg’s that could be read as saying any such thing, I guess we just have to take his word for it—the word of a man who regards him to start with as a “disgruntled has-been” and “addlepated windbag.” I myself beg leave to doubt that Tom has quite got the goods on Bernie. His case looks particularly weak to one who, having seen how careful the latter is to disavow any belief in conspiracies, goes on to read Shales’s snide but subtle mischaracterization in suggesting that Goldberg blamed “a communist conspiracy against him.”

Michael Kinsley, though more in command of his emotions than Tom Shales, is equally contemptuous, airily informing us that “Like a stopped clock, Goldberg isn’t always wrong.” Still, his being right accidentally once or twice isn’t enough to make Kinsley cite either of the examples. Instead he has a grand old time ridiculing the “comic futility of trying to insulate a quotation from denial by adding a second quotation promising to lie about the first one”—a reference to Goldberg’s contention that Andrew Heyward, president of CBS News, confessed to bias at the network and then promised to deny it if he were quoted. He ends by noting Goldberg’s suspicion that the elitists at CBS considered him “white trash” and hinting at his own sense of betrayal by adding that: “Bernard Goldberg may carry many burdens, but the danger of being considered white trash is not one of them,” because “Other epithets are available.”

Well, nobody likes an informer, I guess.

Oh, wait. Somebody *does* like informers. Journalists like informers, because informers give them most of their best stories. Kinsley has nothing to say to the charge that, if Goldberg had betrayed some tobacco company instead of CBS News, he (Kinsley) would hardly have been so censorious. Such a debate always tends to proceed by charge and countercharge of hypocrisy. But that does not mean that Kinsley is not onto something when he writes that

At *The Wall Street Journal* editorial page, presumably, if a colleague announces to the world that he holds the institution and those who work there in contempt, he takes a bit of joshing around the water cooler, then everybody gathers for a group hug and returns to denouncing Tom Daschle.

The point is well taken that every group engaged in a common enterprise takes on the characteristics of an honor-group: a collection of peers to whom one owes a presumptive loyalty and whose opinion of one matters more than that of an outsider. If such a group naturally comes to share a similar worldview, it is fair enough to call it “bias” and a fair old humbug on both sides when discussion turns on whether one is more “biased” than the other.

Such discussions seem to me mere competitions in self-righteousness. I hope I may not be accused of adding to the obloquy which has been unfairly heaped on Bernard Goldberg’s head if I observe that even he is not without sin in this respect. For although he may be, as he clearly wants us to think of him as being, a liberal Democrat whose advocacy of more respectful treatment for conservative views comes from only the purest of journalistic motivations, we can’t quite believe in the shock and outrage he professes to feel at the resentment of Dan Rather and others over being criticized in public by a colleague. Well, well, now, who’d have thought it? Either Goldberg had improbably managed to retain an almost childlike faith in the journalistic high-

mindedness of his CBS colleagues for a quarter of a century before he found that he was sadly mistaken or there is just a little bit of hype here.

For valuable as *Bias* is as an insider’s account of the television news business, in itself it also inadvertently illustrates one of the essential features of that business: namely the news-value of contrariness. In particular, nothing attracts a crowd like a betrayal, and Goldberg’s betrayal of his employers at CBS in order to become a reluctant right-wing hero is (one supposes) not a small part of the reason for his book’s current situation on *The New York Times* best-seller lists. The rest of the reason is of course that large numbers of ordinary folk have known for years of the bias that it took so long for Goldberg to discover, and they like to have their beliefs confirmed. I count myself in this latter category and hasten to add that every one of Goldberg’s examples of bias is at least as well-judged and on-target as it would have been if it had come from an outside observer of the network news “product.”

I just wish that he hadn’t chosen by adopting a tone of high moral outrage to confirm on its throne the bogus god of journalistic “objectivity.” This is the same deity who assures Brian Lavery that being “progressive, literate, pro-European” is the same thing as being “nonpartisan and unbiased.” This false god of objectivity promises an equally false—indeed, an impossible—liberation from bias, and so leads journalists to neglect their devotion to the true god of fairness. If you believe yourself to be “objective” and “unbiased,” you are likely also to believe yourself above criticism. That would seem to be the attitude of many of Bernard Goldberg’s critics, whose consciousness of their own objectivity apparently frees them from any obligation of fairness or civility to someone who questions it. Until we recognize that biases are not to be abolished but rather to be proclaimed, the mummery of charge and countercharge being exchanged by self-righteous prigs can only continue.

Books

Orpheus with arsenic

by Eric Ormsby

François Villon (1431–1463?) is the quintessential Orphean poet, forever glancing back over his shoulder at what he is about to lose. Friends and enemies, lovers, his mother, his many persecutors (real and imagined), his colleagues in roguery, all step from his consummately sculpted verses in the lineaments of dismissal. It is only in bidding adieu that he fully acknowledges others. It is only in the bequeathing gesture that he claims what he has had. At the same time, Villon affects a drastic spontaneity; it is always the present instant in his verses; he seems to be scribbling the stanzas as we read. The most studious of craftsmen—is there a form, from rondeau to double ballade, he did not master?—he calibrates his impromptus so cleverly that his tirades sound virtually unrehearsed, his quips and squibs have an off-the-cuff quality that startles, even after five-hundred years. He is a soliloquist whose repertoire ranges from scorching denunciations to the gentlest and most moving supplications. Consider his ballade to the Virgin Mary which begins “Lady in heaven, Empress here on earth” and which he places in the mouth of his own mother; it is a hymn easily the equal of the verses Dante has St. Bernard sing in the final canto of the *Paradiso* (“*Vergine Madre, figlia del tuo figlio*”).

In Louis Simpson’s new translation¹ the celebrated third stanza reads:

I am a poor woman and very old.

I cannot read and I know nothing.
At the church I belong to, I behold
Heaven painted, harps and lutes are playing,
And a Hell where the damned are boiling.
Heaven gives me joy, Hell great distress.
Let me have the joy, heavenly Goddess
To whose mercy all sinners must apply,
Filled with their faith, not faintheartedness.
In this faith I desire to live and die.

The marvel of the original is that we have the illusion that we are hearing the old mother—*porrette et ancienne*—actually speaking while at the same time cadences and rhymes fall with apparently effortless aplomb, and Simpson manages to replicate this rather well. The rhyme of “distress” and “Goddess” (with the shift of accent that nicely roughens the euphony) and the faintly antiquated *trouvaille* of “faintheartedness” for the phrase “*sans fainte ne paresse*” show both skill and delicacy. These virtues are conspicuous throughout the translation, which must have presented formidable difficulties. It is a measure of Simpson’s success that the difficulties, without being glossed over, rarely obtrude; when they do, the faults of the translation usually arise from a failure to follow the tone of the original, rather than from lexical or semantic misunderstandings.

¹ François Villon’s *The Legacy & The Testament*, translated by Louis Simpson; Story Line Press, 190 pages, \$17.95.

Both *The Legacy* and *The Testament* are poems much concerned with getting even. After Dante, Villon is the greatest poet of payback. But rancor sits uneasily with us. The *ad hominem* (or *ad feminam*) makes us squirm. Villon had no such scruples. He named his enemies as he damned them—over eighty-four are identified explicitly in *The Testament*—and he remained untroubled by the thought that he was being overly “personal” or (God help us!) “judgmental.” An Orpheus with arsenic, quicklime, and pitch, anathema was his native element; in its caustic currents he splashed with unslaked gusto:

In the brains of a cat that hates to fish,
Black, and with no teeth left in its gum,
In the saliva of an old hound which
Is raging with rabies, froth, and scum,
In the foam of a mule beaten like a drum,
Cut up with a scissors in little pieces,
In water in which rats swim with feces,
Frogs, toads, wild animals from far and wide,
Serpents, lizards, everything that pisses,
May those malicious tongues be fried.

In closing he subverted the traditional envoi to the prince with scabrous sublimity:

Prince, strain all these good things to eat.
If you don't have a strainer, use the seat
Of an old pair of trousers, deep and wide.
First dip them in pig shit. Then see to it:
May those malicious tongues be fried.

Another blast aimed at the spice dealer Jehan de la Garde seems tepid by contrast, but it serves to demonstrate how well Villon's denunciations, again and again, encapsulate characters as well as customs in their raving sweep:

Item: I leave *The Golden Mortar*
To Jehan, grocer, of the Guard;
One of the crutches of Saint Maur,
A pestle for a pot of mustard.
Spread it then, as thick as lard,
On him who caused my misery.
Burn, Saint Anthony, the bastard!
He'll get no other legacy.

To have a miscreant slathered with hot mustard is a bequest perhaps only Villon (or Rabelais) might have envisaged: his legacies are at once cruel and cartoonish. With his own reprobate self he takes the same tone, using a final rhyme to cast a sardonic backglow on his own miseries:

Now after many moans and tears,
Anguished groaning and complaining,
Sadnesses and heavy cares,
Labors and grievous wandering,
My brain, made smooth by studying,
And round and empty as a bottle,
Was more improved by suffering
Than by Averroës on Aristotle.

In the original, where Villon piles up the terms of woe—*plainz et pleurs, angoisseux gemissemens, tristesses et douleurs*—the effect is even more disconcerting when we land, with a thump, on *Aristote*, but Simpson acquits himself well here too, even if he cannot muster all the fulsome timbres of lamentation Villon made so signally his own. Thankfully, Simpson has not tried to smooth over Villon's violence of tongue or camouflage it beneath archaisms, as, say, Rossetti tended to do; nor has he exaggerated the poet's already quite uproarious bawdiness, as Swinburne did. Simpson has achieved an uncommon sympathy with his author; the success of his translation is not solely a matter of craft and skill: Rossetti, Swinburne, and Robert Lowell are all more skillful. Simpson, by contrast, seems somehow to have entered into Villon's own spirit.

Readers will be curious to know how this translator handles the most famous poems, such as the “Ballade des dames du temps jadis” whose refrain (“*Mais ou sont les neiges d'antan?*”) has become proverbial. Simpson translates the line as “But where are the snows of yesterday?” This strikes me as superior to the usual “snows of yesteryear” (from Rossetti's translation), though I doubt that Simpson's version will catch on. The transience of snow comes through more dramatically in Simpson: the snow

vanished in a day, not a year, but the archaizing adverb “yesteryear,” while it hazes over the abrupt fleetingness of the snow, does echo the antiquated *d’antan* of the original. Villon himself imparted a slight but definite distancing to the phrase; it is, after all, a ballade, a sung poem, not an apothegm. Transience must be balanced by the sturdiness of song. It is in precisely such tenuous equipoise—between the ribald and the rueful, the elegaic and the expletive—that Villon’s genius resided.

Unfortunately—in one of his few lapses—Simpson bungles the opening stanza; the original is clear and yet, after the third line, the translation becomes muddled:

Tell me in what country is
Flora the beautiful Roman,
Archipiada, or Thais.
Echo who speaks to no man
Unless he speaks first, then she can
Over a river, lake, or bay,
Was too beautiful to be human.
But where are the snows of yesterday?

Echo has here betrayed Simpson by seducing him to chase after a rhyme (“Roman/man/can/human”) that wrecks havoc with his syntax.

Of all versions of this famous poem the Scots translation by the (aptly named) Tom Scott strikes me as the most successful, perhaps because his dialect stands at an angle to English in a way suggestive of how Villon’s language stands to modern French. Here is Scott’s rendition of the same stanza:

Tell me whaur, in whit countrie
Bides Flora nou, yon Roman belle?
Whaur Thais, Alcibiades be,
Thon sibbit cuisins: can ye tell
Whaur clettaran Echo draws pell-mell
Abuin some burn owrchung wi bine
Her beautie’s mair nor human spell—
Ay, whaur are the snaws of langsyne?

Villon clearly loved women, for whom he had a surprisingly subtle and sympathetic regard; they are certainly the dominant fig-

ures in his testamentary poetry: not only his own mother or the Virgin Mary, but also the various lovers he alternately excoriates, cajoles, and caresses. His masterpiece in this genre is undoubtedly the long lament usually known as “La Belle Heaulmière,” or “The Beautiful Helmet Maker,” after its protagonist. Villon’s poem is an extended illustration, if one were needed, of Baudelaire’s line four-hundred years later that “*c’est un dur métier d’être belle femme*” (“It’s hard work being a bombshell”). An old woman, la Belle Heaulmière, catalogues her charms as they once were and as they are now; like Villon, she grasps herself only in the backward glance. The poem is remarkable in that its compassion is tacit and arises from the unflinching scrutiny of a woman’s body in decline. Unlike other compositions of the time, it is not prompted by malicious delight or the kind of Tartuffian schadenfreude that seems to have motivated so many medieval denunciations of the female form. Instead, pity and terror are aroused.

Pretty shoulders, long and slender
Arms; beautiful hands and wrists,
That my fate seemed to intend for
Heated tourneys in the lists
Of passion . . . small, tilting breasts,
Rounded thighs, wide loins, and then
The vulva in its little nest
In the middle of the garden.

Horribly, these have now become:

Wrinkled forehead and gray hair,
Sunken eyebrows, and the eyes
Whose laughter drove men to despair,
Clouding . . . again to itemize.
The nose that was a perfect size,
Hooked. Two hairy ears hang down.
You’d have to look hard to realize
This death’s-head is a face you’ve known.

The end of beauty isn’t good:
Shoulders pulled into a hump,
Arms short, fingers stiff as wood.
The breasts? Shrunk, scarcely a bump.
The same goes for the lips and rump.

The vulva? Ugh! The rounded thigh is
A thigh no more, a shriveled stump
Covered with spots, like sausages.

Simpson even partially succeeds in suggesting that notorious rhyme of “thighs” with “sausages” (*cuisse/saulcisses*). Only in remembering how her body once appeared is the Beautiful Helmet Maker able to capture its full charm and beauty; even the description of her *sadinet* in its “little garden” (*son petit jardin*) is intensely feminine. It is the way a woman rather than a man might regard her intimate anatomy (as is her later unswerving self-disgust). Villon has taken the commonplace of the medieval *ubi sunt?* theme—it is in fact his own most obsessive theme—with its often monotonous litanies of pleasures, powers, and personalities to be forsworn, and made it shockingly individual. Instead of lamenting the vanished glories of Alexander or Caesar, it is the empire of a woman’s body whose fallen splendors he mourns; because he is specific—nose and ears and lips, shoulders, arms, and hands as well as what E. E. Cummings once called “your sweet et cetera”—the poem is deeply moving. It could be a lament for any of us and so becomes a lament for us all.

In one of the later ballades of *The Testament*, Villon’s extraordinary *joie de vivre* surpasses itself and all his characteristic themes collide in a rollicking panegyric to his disreputable life with Fat Margot. Villon is her pimp and when Margot “comes to bed moneyless,” he threatens to beat her, but:

Then we make peace, and she, inflated
More than a poisonous dung beetle,
Farts. She puts a fist to my forehead.
“Gogo,” she says. Then we get drunk until
We fall asleep. When we wake up she’ll
Have a rumbling belly. So the fruit won’t drop
And be wasted, she says, and climbs on top.
This screwing is cutting my life span short.
I’m groaning underneath, and it doesn’t stop
In this brothel where we are holding court.

Compare this to Swinburne’s version of

the same stanza, done a century before:

When all’s up she drops me a windy word,
Bloat like a beetle puffed and poisonous:
Grins, thumps my pate, and calls me
dickey-bird,
And cuffs me with a fist that’s ponderous.
We sleep like logs, being drunken both of us;
Then when we wake her womb begins to stir;
To save her seed she gets me under her
Wheezing and whining, flat as planks are laid:
And thus she spoils me for a whoremonger
Inside this brothel where we drive our trade.

Swinburne achieves a momentum which is admirable but at the same time his rendition is slyly periphrastic; it is not immediately obvious what he means by “a windy word.” Villon was blunt: “*et me fait ung gros pet*,” and Simpson captures this pungent bluntness. Swinburne’s rhymes are certainly superior but he finds them too often at the expense of the original. If Swinburne’s version is more memorable, Simpson’s is ruder and knottier and so, in my view, more faithful to Villon.

We know what life holds in store for Fat Margot, as for her poet-pimp: if not the gallows or the block, the pitiless depredations of age, already so gruesomely depicted. Villon’s *memento mori* is inscribed not on monitory tablets but in the flesh of his personages; when he revels, as here, in the present instant, even wallowing in a love of filth—“*ordure amons*” (“we love filth”), he declares—it is the nakedness and the mire of our common humanity he both mourns and celebrates: *inter faeces et urinam nascimur*, as the medieval church so aptly phrased it.

There is a relentlessness in Villon that will echo throughout later French art and poetry, and not only in such obvious heirs as Rimbaud. The Beautiful Helmet Maker inspired Rodin to one of his most vivid and forceful bronzes (now in the Metropolitan Museum); a naked hag with greasy, disheveled locks, drooping dugs, and pleated belly stands bereft, her very stance a spasm of grief, and yet there is a disturbing dignity even in her ruin. Her nakedness, undeflect-

ed by the mirage of beauty, has become absolute, as though she could be reduced no further. It is her unexpected nobility in decay that both appalls and touches us.

Villon excelled at the rondeau as well. The rondeau that begins "*Mort, j'appelle de ta rigueur*," and which is one of the most beautiful lyrics in French, seems untranslatable to me, but again, Simpson fashions a creditable version: "Death, I appeal your harsh decree/ That has taken my love away." Of course, no translator can match the subtlety of the original in which the play of rhymes—the trio of *rigueur/langueur/vigueur* positioned against the open vowels of *ravie/assourvie/vie*—enhances the threnody of lament. Villon's version is eminently singable while Simpson's is not and perhaps could not be. Here is a huge difference that stands between Villon and ourselves, and one that is beyond mere difference of language. *The Testament* is a long and intricate narrative in strict stanzas interrupted by—or better, graced with—songs in varying forms. The incursion of song, whether sorrowful, amorous, or obscene, softens the harshness of the narrative and sheds a kind of absolving luster over Villon's otherwise quite desperate story of bitter poverty, persecution, and sinfulness. *The Testament* is a saga of redemption, or at least of the search for redemption, a saga in which the narrator suddenly steps forward and sings in his own voice and in accord with his various moods and states of mind.

In his short story "A Lodging for the Night," Robert Louis Stevenson created an indelible imaginary portrait of Villon. The depiction is convincing because it accords so well with our impression of the poet as derived from his verse. Here is how Stevenson portrays him:

The poet was a rag of a man, dark, little, and lean, with hollow cheeks and thin black locks. He carried his four-and-twenty years with feverish animation. Greed had made folds about his eyes, evil smiles had puckered his mouth. The wolf and pig struggled together in his face. It was an eloquent, sharp, ugly, earthly

countenance. His hands were small and prehensile, with fingers knotted like a cord; and they were continually flickering in front of him in violent and expressive pantomime.

In the story, Villon is a curious amalgam of rascality and ingenuousness. Stevenson's is a romanticized portrait but one that has had a certain resonance not just in English but also in French literature. The myth of the vagabond and criminal with a poet's sensibility, an explosive mixture of vehemence and an odd *douceur*, which we find re-enacted in Rimbaud, Céline, Jean Genet, and Louis Calaferte, among others, goes back to Villon. But is it true?

In his 1970 book *Le Testament de Villon ou le gai savoir de la Basoche*, the French philologist Pierre Guiraud argued convincingly that, far from being autobiographical, both *The Legacy* and *The Testament* were coded satires based on an elaborate verbal system and were in fact what he termed "judicial farces." The poems arose, he argued, out of the dramatic performances staged in the close-knit world of "La Basoche," the rather disreputable legal confraternities of Villon's Paris. Having earlier deciphered Villon's fiendishly difficult poems in argot, with their encoded references to sodomy, Guiraud applied his method to the seemingly more straightforward works and came up with startling results. He argued that not only were all the legatees' names historically accurate but that each one when deciphered revealed a kind of hidden wordplay (*calembour*) of a fantastically elaborate sort; each name in effect carried in miniature the various wrangling judicial processes which the poem itself re-enacted. For example, the name of the merchant Jehan Cotart, according to Guiraud's system, is to be broken down into the verb *enjaner*, meaning "to trick," and into the verb *coter*, "to allege." The poet's name—he was born François de Montcorbier—too is subjected to this method: François means "to speak French in an extravagant manner" and Villon denotes "to vilify or outrage." Similarly,

la Grosse Margot comes from the words *grouce*, which means “growl or scold,” and *margote*, someone who “utters cries.”

Any disinterested reader of Guiraud’s treatise soon realizes that he has come into the orbit of a man gripped by an *idée fixe*; his explication of Villon’s code, complete with charts of vowels and learned dialectological divagations, stupefies. Guiraud’s method has the virtue of making sense of much that is otherwise incomprehensible in *The Testament*. But what does this make of the poem as poem?

Guiraud may be right about his codes, but it matters little except to historians and philologists. The freshness of the poems survives their annotators. Villon’s “epitaph,” a rondeau written in prison, still makes us smile, even as we take pleasure in its suavity:

Grant him, Lord, your peace eternal,
And your light perpetually,
Who had no plate or bowl that he
Could call his own. His head was all
Shaved like a turnip or a ball.
For what reason? Don’t ask me.
Grant him, Lord, your peace eternal.

In prison he was chained to the wall
And hit in the ass repeatedly.
He yelled “I appeal!” which could not be
Clearer, but had no effect at all.
Grant him, Lord, your peace eternal.

As this shows, Simpson’s translation—at once stately and slangy, hard-bitten and delicate—brings Villon’s swaggering accents back to vociferous life and that is what counts in the end.

Be brave

Peter Conradi Iris Murdoch: A Life.
W. W. Norton, 706 pages, \$35

reviewed by Jeffrey Meyers

Iris Murdoch (1919–99) was—unlike most modern writers—intelligent, nice, and good.

Her physical beauty seemed to reflect the inward beauty of her soul. In person, she was observant, responsive, and acute, as well as serene and the mistress of herself. She had a great deal of love to give and was loving to the world in general. Born in Dublin, she was educated by high-minded bohemians at Badminton School, near Bristol. The influential headmistress shared a bedroom in Iris’s dormitory with another woman, but was also a “moral guide” who discouraged intimate friendships among her girls. Nonetheless, she gave an imprimatur to Iris’s lifelong propensity for lesbian affairs with various butch types, including her best friend and an unnamed temptress who threatened her marriage.

In 1938, at Oxford, where she earned a first-class degree in classics, Iris joined the Communist Party to express her solidarity with sufferers. Even someone as bright as Iris could, by adhering to the party line (which could suddenly change, as Orwell observed, while one went to the bathroom during a meeting), remain blind to political reality after the purge trials, the Nazi-Soviet Pact, and the Russian invasion of Finland. Cold baths and irregular Greek verbs prepared her to become a junior civil servant at the wartime treasury. Once there, still full of misguided idealism, she passed information about her work to the Communists. She later said the party had “taught her from the inside how a small, ruthless group of individuals can wield destructive power.”

After the war, she worked with refugees in occupied Austria and witnessed the complete breakdown of European society. She was more attracted to Estonians than Etonians, and the refugees in her fiction are spiritually as well as politically displaced. One of her favorite quotes, from Seneca, was: “Why weep for the end of life? The whole of it deserves our tears.” Her life was a quest for knowledge, experience, and freedom. She was drawn to Existentialism (and wrote the first book on Sartre in English) because it was “concerned with the concrete puzzle of personal existence, rather than with general theories about the universe.” In

books like *The Sovereignty of the Good*, she praised thinkers who “live out the consequences of their own attitude of mind.” She defined moral philosophy, a striking contrast to the Logical Positivism that dominated Oxbridge in her time, as the study of “what in the last resort can only be lived.”

Throughout her life Iris was surprisingly promiscuous. As a girl at Oxford she cried when a young man tried to undress her, but later solemnly announced, “I have parted company with my virginity [and feel] relieved from something which was obsessing me.” Once she got the hang of it, she became terribly keen on sex—both with those she was attracted to and those she wanted to console. Like Will Rogers, she never met a man she didn’t like. Riveted by “the metaphysics of the first kiss,” she wrote that there had never been a moment “when I have trembled on the brink of such a [passionate] exchange & drawn back.” One of her fundamental assumptions was that she had the power to seduce anyone. She was thrown out of lodgings by several indignant landladies. Alluding to *Crime and Punishment*, she exclaimed that if they were in Russia, the last one to chuck her out would have been “destined to be killed with a hatchet.”

Many, many men fell in love with Iris, a “shaggy little Shetland pony.” She could, like Daisy Buchanan in *The Great Gatsby*, smash up things and creatures and then retreat back into her vast carelessness. But she too was rejected, first by an Oxford contemporary and then by an Hungarian. She was once seen crying (she wept easily) in a bus. When a colleague tried to comfort her, she uneasily reassured him with: “I’m quite all right. It’s just this love business.” In her novels she is not merely omniscient but firmly in control of her unruly characters. It’s fascinating to read about her sex life and imagine her in the grip of passion or falling short of her own high moral standards.

The most notable of her legion of loves and lovers were the English soldier Frank Thompson, the great Italian classicist Arnaldo Momigliano, the Czech anthropologist Franz Steiner, and the Romanian nov-

elist Elias Canetti. In this new biography Peter Conradi describes the handsome and heroic Thompson as “brilliant, tall, slim, fair-haired, grey-blue-eyed, high-cheek-boned, a gifted poet, an intense idealist dedicated to stopping Hitler.” After parachuting into pro-Nazi Bulgaria and fighting on the side of the partisans, he was betrayed and captured. After foolishly affirming his Communism, he was (contrary to the Geneva Convention) summarily executed. Thompson and his men all died while raising the salute of freedom. The villagers

were sobbing, many present declared the scene was one of the most moving in all Bulgarian history, that the men’s amazing courage was the work of an English Officer who carried their spirits as well as his own.

Momigliano, Steiner, and Canetti were—like her adored Oxford professor Eduard Fraenkel (who lusted for, but never bedded, Iris)—older, eminent, exiled, and physically unattractive European Jews who satisfied her intense need for father figures and gurus. Iris felt that “any worthwhile person ought to have at least *some* Jewish blood” and declared: “I am practically a Jew myself.” Steiner (the only one of these gurus who was not married) was—like his namesake, countryman, and hero Franz Kafka—sweet, frail and sickly, suffering, neurotic, and blocked. He too needed an axe to break the frozen sea inside him. His cardiac condition made their lovemaking a precarious event. “In the end it happened,” he passively wrote. “But she was afraid because of my heart. Neither of us made a single spontaneous movement.” Two weeks later, he described a pathetic and humiliating but deeply moving scene, worthy of the tortured relations of Kafka and Felice Bauer:

We undressed, but on the draughty sofa my pains became once again severe. She was the more sensible of the two of us, told me to have a rest, and then helped me into my clothes. All that with so much concern, good-

ness, love and tact that this evening brought us closer to each other than a successful union.

Soon afterward, Steiner died at the age of forty-three and joined Thompson in Iris's "private pantheon of martyrs."

Steiner was succeeded by the jealous, brutal, and monstrous Canetti who, like Iris's philosophical hero Ludwig Wittgenstein, was both brilliantly numinous and destructively demonic. Canetti not only disbelieved in God but also hated religion. He declared "the Day of Judgment would happen when the human race arose with one voice to condemn God." In his most influential book, *Crowds and Power*, he reduced history, Conradi writes, "to slaughterhouse, blood-lust and a [Nietzschean] will to power." If the gentle Steiner appealed to her maternal side, the egomaniacal Canetti satisfied her "rather specialized love for the tyrant."

When she published her first book and began to disengage from Canetti, Iris fell in love with the equally bookish and brilliant, quixotic, eccentric Oxford don John Bayley. She married him in 1956 and lived in contented squalor (their roof leaked on the exact spot where they lay in bed) for the next forty-three years. When, at first, they desperately needed a place to embrace and kiss, they instinctively headed for the London Library. Climbing the iron stairs to an empty stack, they "leaned against the shelves in the half darkness & clung to each other. J. wept." The novelist A. N. Wilson, once Iris's biographer, believed John acted as Prospero, "a sort of controller of the demons and spirits who flew in and out of her consciousness."

Conradi never explains how Iris managed to avoid pregnancy. There's no mention of abortions for Iris (which may have prevented her from having children later on), though she helped other women procure them. Her mother had married when pregnant, had a difficult birth, and didn't want any more children. Though amazed that she'd produced such a brilliant child, she perversely hoped that Iris wouldn't have any

children of her own. Iris, who had strong maternal feelings, thought children would not interfere with—indeed, might well enhance—her creative life. Conradi relegates this crucial question to an offhand footnote, and never explains why she and John never had a child.

Conradi is good on Fraenkel, Thompson's wartime career, Iris's refugee work, her sex life, and her relations with Steiner and Canetti. His biography, though well researched and clearly written, is also deeply flawed. In the oddly defensive introduction, he admits that he has *not* fulfilled the biographer's primary task by reading all of Iris's letters, scattered in libraries throughout the world; that he has "little space" (in more than seven-hundred pages) to explore her recent friendships; that he focuses on her formative years, 1919–56; and that he might well have called his book *Young Iris*.

With strange imbalance, Conradi covers her first twenty-five years in two-hundred pages; the next twelve years in 210 pages; and the last forty-three years, when she wrote all her books and established her reputation, in 190 pages, including her last twenty-eight years in only seventy pages and her last five years in only nine. It's not clear whether Conradi agreed not to poach on John Bayley's territory (though Bayley had published three books on Iris before this biography appeared); was overly sensitive about the feelings of living people; feared libel; or had his book ruthlessly cut by the publisher. But he certainly made a fatal strategic error. As Conradi buries the major part of her life under a tedious and pedestrian analysis of her novels, the narrative grinds to a halt. This book is stuffed, like a turkey, with the crumbs of his previous critical book on her work.

There are other serious problems. Conradi makes unseemly and irritating references to himself as well as to his earlier book, his lover, and (three times) to his dog. He stultifies the reader and again clogs the narrative with a mass of trivial, boring details: a long list of ancestors who, in the nineteenth

century, died young; the clothing worn, games played, and sweets bought in kindergarten; the badge of her school uniform; five pages on her group of strolling players; otiose descriptions of a flat, the names of characters in fragments of unpublished novels, the plants in her garden. The ubiquitous footnotes at the bottom of the page are a pointless and pedantic attempt to cram even more unassimilated details into the book. But he doesn't make these details come alive to illuminate Iris's character.

By contrast, Conradi fails to discuss many important issues: Iris's response to the alarming and extraordinary lectures of the influential Oxford philosopher J. L. Austin; the reason why her friend Raymond Queneau was demobbed as early as 1940; how and by whom Frank Thompson was fatally betrayed in Bulgaria; her first response to America when she lectured at Yale in 1959; how she nearly drowned in the early 1960s; her important friendships with the Canadian painter Alex Colville and with the philosopher Richard Wollheim.

A number of errors (which can be corrected in the paperback edition) have crept into the text. Arnaldo Momigliano's first name is misspelled throughout, as are the Bulgarian town Vileki and Alcalá de Henares; "brahmin Boston" should be "Boston brahmin"; the first trade edition of *Ulysses* was 1934 (not 1937); the rousing poem "Abdul the Bulbul Ameer" is anonymous (not by Percy French); Gustaaf (not Emil) Renier wrote *The English—Are They Human?*; Heinrich Mann's Professor Unrat (misspelled in the book) first appeared in an eponymous novel, later filmed as *The Blue Angel*; Thomas Mann's "Mario and the Magician" (1929) is an allegory of Mussolini's fascism (not Hitler's Nazism); Janet Adam Smith was the literary editor (not editor) of *The New Statesman*; Paul Potts was *not* a close friend of George Orwell; and the 1960s (not the 1950s) was the decade of sexual experimentation.

Finally, Conradi's ear is not finely tuned to the numerous allusions in Iris's work. He fails to note the echoes of early Auden,

Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, John Reed's *Ten Days That Shook the World*, Eliot's "still centre," *King Lear*, the source in L. P. Hartley's *Go-Between* for the names Marcus and Leo in *The Time of the Angels*, and Fitzgerald's description of himself at Princeton as "a poor boy in a rich boy's school."

Iris, adamantly if unconvincingly, denied that her characters were based on real models, as if that indelicate maneuver would reveal the limitations of her creative powers. But Conradi, moving deftly between her life and work, shows which people inspired her art. This is meaningful if the models are well known. If not, not: "Like Hugo torn between Anna and Sadie [in *Under the Net*], Yorick [Smythies] in real life was divided between two loves (neither of whom, however, resembled the Quentin sisters)." Few readers, even those familiar with her work, can recall such particular episodes from her Russian profusion of characters and convoluted plots.

Iris once exclaimed: "Part of me wants to be Raymond Queneau, another wants to be Thomas Mann," and she never fully integrated the fantastic and realistic elements in her work. Like her masters—Balzac, Dickens, and Dostoyevsky—she was a hard-working, hasty, always driven, and sometimes careless writer, who started to think about her next novel about half an hour after completing her previous one. She recognized serious flaws in her work when her American editor, Marshall Best, pointed them out, but lost interest once the book was finished and was eager to get on with the next one. Her unwillingness to revise prevented her from realizing her full potential as an artist.

Though brilliant and incisive, Iris could also be muddled, wanting to touch all the (contradictory) intellectual bases: Communist and Anglo-Catholic as well as Buddhist and Sufist. Like many rationalists—Huxley and Koestler are notable examples—she lapsed into fuzzy mysticism and interest in the paranormal. But the great qualities of her novels, as Malcolm Bradbury observed,

are their “sensuous pleasures, fantastic inventions, high intelligence and moral dignity.” Her books, still in print, have sold extremely well, and she left a staggeringly impressive estate of £1,803,491. Tragically aware, as she fell into the sea-mists of Alzheimer’s, that she was losing her mental powers, as early as 1993 she recorded in her journal: “Find difficulty in thinking and writing. Be brave”—and she always was.

Spheres & cubes

John L. Casti

Mathematical Mountaintops.

Oxford University Press, 177 pages, \$25

reviewed by James Franklin

Mathematical problems mostly come in two kinds. There are the old and easy ones, like “What do you get when you multiply six by seven?” whose answers can only excite seven-year-olds and autistic adults. Then there are the problems that interest research mathematicians, whose incomprehensibility begins to fade only after several university degrees in the higher algebra. It is hard to make dinner-party conversation or requests for funding out of a discipline whose very terms are well beyond the reach of ordinary mortals. There are a few mathematical questions that can be understood by anyone but whose solutions have been achieved only by the last few decades of difficult research. John Casti’s book presents five of them.

Sir Walter Raleigh asked his mathematical adviser for a formula for the number of cannonballs in various stacks on the deck of his ship. The adviser came up with something, but realized it was not clear whether the balls were being stacked in the most efficient way. There is a natural way to pack spheres tightly: lay down the deck layer in “hexagonal” fashion, where each ball is surrounded by six others. Then put the second layer so that the balls lie in every second depression in the first layer; the second layer

will then also form a hexagonal packing. Then put the third layer in every second depression of the second layer, so that the balls of the third layer are directly above those of the first. If this is done on a large scale, the balls will occupy $\pi/\sqrt{18}$ of the space, or just over 74 percent. Is this the densest packing possible? Kepler conjectured that it was. Fruit shop owners thought it was obvious. Casti reports a New Zealand greengrocer amazed to hear that mathematicians had been working on the problem for four hundred years. Asked how long it took him to find the best packing, he said “You just put one on top of the other. It took me about two seconds.” But conjecture and tradition are not enough for mathematicians. They demand proof. A proof now exists, but it was not achieved until 1998, when Thomas Hales of the University of Michigan put together the last steps, using computer verifications of many complicated cases.

Casti’s other four problems are also easy to grasp, though some more so than others. Perhaps easiest is the Four Color Theorem. Maps are colored so that countries sharing a border have different colors; the theorem says that no matter how complicated the map is, no more than four colors are ever needed. (That is, for maps on a plane or sphere—for maps on the surface of a donut, it is different, and one of Casti’s color plates shows a map on a donut that requires seven colors.) The appeal of the result lies in its simplicity, which underlies the potentially infinite complexity of actual maps. It was conjectured in the mid-nineteenth century, but only proved by Appel and Haken in 1976. Their proof used a good deal of computer verification of cases (checked by another computer), leading to some soul-searching in the mathematical community over whether the old ideal of simple, understandable, and surveyable proofs was dead. Would mathematicians be replaced by machines, as clerks with pencil and paper had been replaced by calculators?

The self-image of humans received a

boost with the solution of the next of Casti's five problems, Fermat's Last Theorem. Conjectured by Fermat around 1650, it says we can, for example, be sure the equation $8^5 + 13^5 = 14^5$ is not true, without doing any calculations. For *no* equation of the form $x^n + y^n = z^n$ is true, for any positive whole numbers x , y , z , and n (except for $n=1$, obviously, and $n=2$, when some cases such as $3^2 + 4^2 = 5^2$ are possible). Three-and-a-half centuries of hard work later, the theorem was proved by Andrew Wiles and Richard Taylor in 1994 with no assistance from a computer.

The fourth problem is the Continuum Hypothesis, which concerns the comparability in size of infinite sets (some infinite sets are bigger than others, and it is unclear which is the second smallest). The last is Hilbert's Tenth Problem, that is, the tenth in David Hilbert's list of twenty-three major unsolved problems in mathematics, which he set in 1900 as a challenge for the new century. It asks whether there is a mechanical procedure, such as could be programmed into a computer, for deciding whether a Diophantine equation has solutions (a Diophantine equation is one like the Fermat equation $x^n + y^n = z^n$, where solutions must be whole numbers). The Leningrad mathematician Matyasevich proved in 1970 that the answer is in the negative: no such procedure exists. (Soviet pure mathematics was always very strong: geniuses gravitated towards it because it had no political problems and no need for computers.) Hilbert was thus shown to have had a double prescience: firstly, in understanding the importance of problems about what can be computed fifty years before computers were invented and secondly in choosing a problem that revealed a fundamental limitation to what computers can do.

The crucial question for a popular book on mathematics is whether the average reader is going to understand it. In this case, the answer is sometimes yes, sometimes no. Unfortunately, it is not always clear what the reader is expected to grasp. At one mo-

ment, rational numbers will be defined, then a few pages later the reader will be expected to follow logically complex arguments like "every square is either a multiple of 4 or one more than a multiple of 4, depending on whether it is the square of an even or an odd number. So the difference of two squares can never be two more than a multiple of 4 . . ." There are also some minor errors that impede understanding. But if the reader is prepared to plow on without worrying about not understanding some sentences, there is genuine insight to be had. Things are a lot clearer, certainly, than in books on popular cosmology and quantum physics. And even if much in the hard parts of the proofs inevitably cannot be explained, the questions themselves are properly laid out, along with why they are important and at least some idea of the concepts in the proofs. .

The book is especially good on some of the related problems that the work on these "Mathematical Mountaintops" has led to. The survey of yet unproved conjectures that generalize Fermat's Last Theorem is excellent, as is the material on foams. The bubbles in foams, like the spheres of Kepler's Conjecture, fill space with an array of regular shapes. Among the strangest mathematical entities discovered in the 1990s is the Weaire-Phelan foam, which fills space remarkably efficiently by means of two types of cells, one with fourteen sides and one with twelve. The reader inspired to find a book where it is possible really to understand everything might try Keith Devlin's *Mathematics: The Science of Patterns*.

Mathematics is not running out of problems. Casti promises another book on some of those still unsolved, including the one now regarded as the Everest of the mathematical world, the Riemann Hypothesis (it is not easy to explain what this is). He lists in an appendix the seven Clay Prize problems, for whose solution the Clay Mathematics Institute has offered a million dollars each. Landon Clay, the mutual fund magnate putting up the money, says "Unfortunately, the established revealed relig-

ions no longer provide the answers that are satisfactory, and that translates into a need for certainty and truth.” Certainty is available in mathematics, to the distress of those unhappy with such regressive notions. So is beauty, which may perhaps encourage art lovers who are out of sympathy with the offerings of modern curators. Casti actually opens his book with Aristotle’s thought that “those who assert that the mathematical sciences say nothing of the beautiful are in error. The chief forms of beauty are order, commensurability, and precision.” A production with any one of those qualities may not earn a sale to a leading museum of contemporary art, but, Casti shows, a piece of mathematics with all of them can still achieve success in the profession farthest removed from the cultural degradation of the present age: mathematics.

Contrary to the impression given by elementary mathematics that the discipline deals mainly with simple problems, much of recent mathematics is concerned with how to cope with complexity. Spheres and cubes are simple, but weather prediction is not. Even shapes are not. Shortly after Hales announced his proof of the Kepler Conjecture, he had a call from the Ann Arbor farmers’ market. “We need you down here right away,” they said. “We can stack the oranges, but we’re having trouble with the artichokes.”

Life in Yiddishland

Miriam Weinstein

Yiddish: A Nation of Words.

Steerforth Press; 301 pages, \$26

reviewed by Sanford Pinsker

A bit more than thirty years ago Leo Rosten published *The Joys of Yiddish*, a warm-hearted book that walked its readers through a wide variety of Yiddish jokes, salty aphorisms, and comic types. One learned, for example, how to distinguish between the *schlemiel* and his ever-present

cousin the *schlimazel*, and the lengths that a *schmorrer* (“shameless beggar”) would go to wangle a meal. Rosten, best known for his humorous *New Yorker* sketches, was well aware that humor depends, above all else, on three things: timing, timing, and timing. But even Rosten must have been amazed when *The Joys of Yiddish* took off. Here is a case where the Zeitgeist worked decidedly in his favor—not only in terms of how fashionable ethnic Jewishness had become, but also how the 1967 War in Israel had greatly heightened the consciousness of many otherwise assimilated Jewish Americans. Yiddishists, by contrast, were not impressed. For decades, Jewish-American novelists, stand-up comics, Broadway producers, and Hollywood filmmakers had used Yiddish words as an easy seasoning. They had, in a word, *chutzpah* and sprinkled Yiddishisms into their concoctions without so much as a passing nod to Jewish history or culture. Rosten’s book was hardly the worst example, but as a serious Yiddish writer was quick to tell me, “He knows the ‘joys’ of Yiddish. But what about its sorrows? These, he doesn’t know.”

Miriam Weinstein’s *Yiddish: A Nation of Words* is meant to be a popular, rather than scholarly, history of Yiddish, and, as such, it succeeds admirably. It is not only engaging and clearly written, but it is also eminently accessible to anyone with curiosity and a functioning heart. Her book, Weinstein explains at the outset,

will use the language as a way to mark the meandering path of Jewish history. Then it will be time for a rest, maybe a *glazel tey*, a *shtikl broit*, a *shmapps*—a little glass of tea, a piece of bread, a drink of whisky—in the *shtetl*, the archetypal Jewish town. We will track the language through the industrial and intellectual revolution that swept Yiddish into the modern world . . . Then we’re going to talk some geopolitical specifics—what happened in Eastern Europe, Russia, Israel, and the United States. The Holocaust will shut the curtain on much of the world we have come to know. We will pause to mourn and to pay our respects.

Then, like the Yiddish language and the people who speak it, we will gather our strength and our memories, pick ourselves up, and stride on.

Weinstein makes no bones about the fact that she is not a linguist, not a historian, not a scholar of any sort. But she is clearly an engaging amateur, one who knows what she is talking about and, better yet, who talks about it with a cheerleader's passion. There are times, however, when her enthusiasm wears a bit thin, and nowhere is this truer than when she dodges what strikes me as the central burden of her "history." As Aristotle rightly pointed out long, long ago, a story should have a beginning, a middle, and an end—and the same is true for a history of Yiddish.

Weinstein does a first-rate job in the earlier sections of her book, showing how Yiddish developed by adapting the words of Old French and, later, German to the needs of a people thrown into exile and consigned to generations of wandering. "Yiddishland," in Weinstein's formulation, is what you get when a people do not have a land of their own, but fashion a sense of who they are from the words they speak and later write. Based on the Hebrew alphabet, Yiddish is the language of the secular world. It is the medium through which Jews poured out their hearts—to each other, and to God. Hebrew, by contrast, was formal and wedded to conventional piety. To put the matter as simply as a reviewer can: in Hebrew, Jews read that they are a Chosen People, a kingdom of priests, and a holy tribe. They had been given the Torah, and their covenant with God requires them to obey 613 commandments. In Yiddish these same Jews could reply "*Yo, got, mir zinen dayn oysdervaylt folk, ober farvos hostu undz*

geartf oyshalm?" ("Yes, God, we are your chosen people. But why did you have to choose us?"). The Jews developed a complicated system of internal bilingualism that allowed them to navigate the distance between the sacred world of the Torah and the secular world surrounding them.

The middle of this long story is filled with the treasures of nineteenth-century Yiddish writers such as Mendele the Bookseller, Y. L. Peretz, and the incomparable Sholem Aleichem. Add to these towering figures dozens of poets, playwrights, essayists, and intellectuals who fiercely debated every ism of their time and the result is the triumph of a language once regarded as lowly. Weinstein gives human faces to what, in dry-as-dust tomes, would have been much heavy slogging. *Yiddish*, in a word, isn't.

That said, however, what must now be faced—and faced squarely—is that the Holocaust utterly destroyed this vibrant world. Yes, there are places where college students can learn first-year Yiddish as they might French or Spanish, and, yes, we are in the midst of a revival of interest in klezmer music with its wailing minor keys and Yiddish lyrics, but none of this, alas, will make Yiddish the rich cultural language it once was—and this includes an obligatory mention of the rapidly growing number of Yiddish speakers among the ultra-Orthodox around the world. Weinstein knows this, and, while I can understand why she prefers to say that Yiddish is now on "life-support," to be truthful, the end of the history she has so admirably written is that "Yiddishland," in any meaningful sense, is gone. Cheerleaders for Yiddish don't, indeed, *can't*, write such a sentence. For better or worse, historians do.

Which god has failed?

by Paul Hollander

The important thing was not to admit you were wrong in any fundamental way.

—Tom Wolfe, “The Land of Rococo Marxists”

Political-intellectual currents in the aftermath of the collapse of Soviet Communism continue to stimulate compelling questions, some of them timeless, others closely linked to the historic event.¹ How do people acquire strong political beliefs and commitments, and why do they retain them even after they have proven to be destructive, foolish, contradictory, or irrational, as the case may be? Under what conditions do idealism and fanaticism become indistinguishable? How do moral and political values intersect?

Such questions remain relevant because of the familiar spectacle of fanatics slaughtering, with a clear conscience, their perceived enemies to advance a cause and rid the world of undesirables. Puzzling questions are also raised by the seemingly unyielding disposition of some intellectuals to overcome the “cognitive dissonance” between historical evidence and their residual commitments. Clinging to such beliefs is

especially remarkable when specific historical events and revelations have decisively invalidated them, when their ethical substance has been shown to disappear without a trace in the process of their attempted realization.

Over a decade after the fall of Soviet Communism, it is apparent that numerous major Western public figures, opinion-makers, and intellectuals have preserved some of their core beliefs, if not in the defunct political systems themselves, at least in the supporting ideas; the collapse did not discredit these ideas in their eyes. Their continuing devotion is of great intellectual-historical and psychological interest.

Daniel Singer’s belief that “the tragic abortive attempt [in the former Soviet Union] proves nothing about the impossibility . . . of building socialism” is quite typical. Cornel West gets around the problem simply by declaring that “Marxist thought becomes even more relevant after the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe than it was before.” Louis Althusser accomplished the same by, in Tony Judt’s words, “remov[ing] Marxism altogether from the realm of history, politics, and experience, and thereby [rendering] it invulnerable to any criticism of the empirical sort.” John Cassidy in an article on “The Return of Karl Marx” proposed that “Marx’s legacy has been obscured by the failure of Communism”—another way of suggesting that Marxism had little to

¹ Half a century after *The God That Failed* chronicled the disillusionment of Western intellectuals with the Soviet system and its supporting beliefs, there have been no comparable self-reflections occasioned by the collapse of the former Soviet Union, much less any from former supporters of Mao, Castro, Ho Chi Minh, or the Sandinistas.

do with Communist states. A survey of media responses to the 150th anniversary of the publication of the *Communist Manifesto* in *Society* found widespread reverence and “unrestrained celebration.” Many substitute stimulants have been found for the kind of moral indignation Marxism used to systematize and channel. Again Tom Wolfe:

Marxism may be dead and the proletariat has proved hopeless. . . . But we can find new proletariats . . . women, non-whites . . . homosexuals, transsexuals . . . pornographers, prostitutes . . . which we can now use to express our indignation toward the powers that be.

The moral neutralization of events or policies that cast serious doubt on the political commitments and beliefs here discussed is the essential precondition for their preservation. It is accomplished either by altogether ignoring, denying, and minimizing the events or by admitting that they occurred—that impure means have been used—but insisting that they did not taint or endanger the noble ends or undermine the foundation of ideals. (Koestler, a long time ago, referred to this as “the doctrine of unshaken foundations.”) Good intentions are what really matter. Defunct Communist states and movements survive in the minds of these individuals as tragic or misunderstood embodiments of good intentions. For many “being on the left” has come to mean not specific policies but a diffuse sentimental claim on virtue, hope, and morality—as for example for Richard Rorty who associates the left with the idea of “defending the weak against the strong.” Those still sympathetic to these political ideologies and systems that supposedly embodied these good intentions see themselves as idealists, people of strong and pure feelings, selfless critics of evil and especially greed. Their sense of identity is durably stamped by such increasingly and irrepressibly sentimental self-conceptions. William Sloan Coffin, the venerable “activist” and social critic of the 1960s tellingly entitled his recent “essays on public morality” as “The Heart is a Little to the Left.”

A key to the preservation of moral-political commitments and loyalties is the handling of the problem of ends and means. Arno Meyer wrote that “*Leaving aside the human costs . . . the economic achievements of the first five-year plan [in the Soviet Union] were astonishing*” (my emphasis). How could the human costs of these alleged accomplishments be “left aside”? Did the putative economic achievements balance the lives and freedoms lost in the course of seeking to attain them?

In an interview, Eric Hobsbawm, the widely revered historian, was asked: “In 1934, millions of people are dying in the Soviet experiment. If you had known that, would it have made a difference to you at the time? To your commitments? To being a Communist?” “If I were to give you a retrospective answer . . . I would have said, ‘probably not.’” Hobsbawm explained. “Because in a period in which . . . mass murder and mass suffering are absolutely universal, the chance of a *new world being born in great suffering* would still have been worth backing” (my emphasis). The memory of this chance of a new world being born remains precious, as Hobsbawm’s refusal to distance himself from its major doctrinal fund, Marxism, indicates. Elsewhere, Hobsbawm has provided further help for understanding the mentality here pondered as he proposed that “the Communist intellectual [in the West] in opting for the USSR . . . did so because on balance the good on his side seemed to outweigh the bad.” For these intellectuals (Hobsbawm obviously included), capitalism was the overriding, axiomatic “bad.” He also wrote, rather self-servingly, that “modern political choice is not a constant process of selecting men or measures, but a single or infrequent choice between packages in which we buy the disagreeable part of the contents because there is no other way to be politically effective.” In other words, once the choice had been made there was no need to rethink it; the commitment must endure. He doesn’t explain how overlooking “disagreeable” matters, say, Soviet collectivization or the Gu-

lag, translates into political effectiveness, or, for that matter, what he means by effectiveness. The reference to the outrages noted above as “disagreeable” is a rather transparent attempt to downgrade what should be profoundly disturbing matters and avoid confronting their moral dimensions.

Age is surely a major factor in the maintenance of these attitudes and attachments. Hobsbawm is in his eighties (born 1917); other notable figures of similar persuasion are similarly aged, for example Howard Zinn (born 1922), another historian and a relentless critic of capitalism and American society. While not a former friend of the Soviet Union, he is among many who consider anti-Communism (“our bizarre preoccupation”) worse than Communism. Noam Chomsky is in his seventies as is Gore Vidal—both noted for their boundless contempt for American society. Chomsky has found no fewer than fifty reasons to consider the United States a totalitarian society and his abundant political writings make clear his unshakable conviction that the United States is the most odious entity that ever existed. Ramsey Clark (born 1927) has converted his rejection of American society into fervent support for Saddam Hussein’s Iraq and virtually any movement, or country, opposed to his own. As he notes in *Challenge to Genocide: Let Iraq Live*, this unique embodiment of evil, the United States,

has created weapons systems and executed plans to devastate a small and defenceless country [i.e., Iraq] . . . first with a direct assault by fire, then with more deadly ice of enforced isolation, malnutrition, and impoverishment. . . . There was no war. No combat. There was only a deliberate, systematic genocide of a defenseless population.

The scorching moral indignation leaves no room for any displeasure with Saddam Hussein; those who accuse him of extravagant spending are “appealing to prejudice” and offering “patently foolish and false excuses to continue the sanctions.” Americans

are insufficiently enraged by the “arrogance” and “crimes” of their government because

they are distracted by personal problems and insecurities and absorbed in the many circuses provided by power to consume their conscious time and sedate their pain from conscience. . . . The American culture conditions people to value their own material well-being more than they love justice.

Luckily Mr. Clark escaped any conditioning.

People who invest much of their lives in certain ideas, causes, and animosities cannot be expected to discard them lightly; the very length of the commitment irresistibly transforms itself into proof of the worthiness of the cause and becomes the mainspring (in the case in point) of what Tony Judt in *The New York Review of Books* called “the desire to find at least some residual meaning in the whole Communist experience.” That such beliefs and causes tend to be associated with one’s youth makes them seem all the more authentic and appealing. Sunset Hall in Los Angeles is a home for elderly leftists of unchanged convictions including a 101-year-old “rabbi’s son from Russia, who was a messenger in the Bolshevik army [and] is unwavering in his admiration for Lenin. ‘He is the greatest politician we ever had in this world,’ said Mr. Darnov,” to *The New York Times*. Youthful idealism (its memory, or illusion) is self-evidently pure and invincible, especially in retrospect and when nurtured by some sort of group solidarity and sense of community (however ephemeral). Retrospective veneration of such idealism explains the waves of nostalgia for the 1960s among Americans who were at the time in college and experienced the well-known dynamics of crowd behavior in the protests of the period.² Even more remarkable to Arthur

2 In *I Married A Communist*, Philip Roth referred to this disposition as “a spectral residue of those rapturous revolutionary days when everyone craving for change . . . madly, unforgivably—underestimates how mankind mangles its noblest ideas and turns them into tragic farce.”

Schlesinger, Jr., in a piece in *The New Republic*, is “that the fall of communism in the rest of the world should be accompanied by the rise of the sentimental glorification of communism in America. The Communist Party of the United States, we are often told, enlisted the bravest and most generous-hearted Americans.” This “sentimental glorification” began in the late 1960s and was part of the anti-anti-Communism of the period, an important byproduct of the times.

These attitudes and positions have been stimulated by aversions that have remained remarkably constant over several decades rather than by the more transient objects of affection and admiration: the different Communist movements and systems themselves. It is these widely shared and durable aversions that best explain the reluctance to undertake a serious revision of the world-views in question and to part company with the leftist causes in the wake of the fall of Communism. For example the old idea of “repressive tolerance” (Marcuse) is still embraced by Daniel Singer who avers that “the ruling ideology is like the air we breathe, and most of the time we are unaware of its existence.” Capitalism and especially its characterological incarnation, greed, remain the arch-evil for many self-respecting intellectuals. Barry Smart believes that “capitalism continues to generate unacceptable forms of inequality and exploitation . . . [as well as] an accelerating deterioration in the quality of life and a growing ecological crisis.” All of which establishes “the desirability of an alternative form of life.” Admittedly the adversarial terminology has undergone some change: “globalization” has increasingly replaced “multinationals” and the word “capitalism” as such seems less often used. But, as Fareed Zakaria noted also in *The New Republic*, “a certain kind of unyielding leftism still finds its safest haven in the critiques of capitalism, including its rejection on aesthetic grounds.”

Meetings of professional academic organizations reflect these trends. At the last annual meeting of the American Socio-

logical Association, entitled “Oppression, Domination, and Liberation,” the evils of the world continued to be linked exclusively with the United States, capitalism, and “class exploitation.” At an academic conference on globalization, a participant reported that “much of what I heard suggested the same deep alienation from American society that I fled in 1976.” The cultural left dominated the conference, and “still lives, amazingly in the bygone world of capitalist pigs, power to the people, and Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh.” As to the latter, Carol Brightman (better known as the author or editor of worshipful writings about Castro’s Cuba) observed in *The Los Angeles Times Book Review* that “There is an epic sweep to the life of Ho Chi Minh, who was possessed of an idea for which the world refused to make room.” Another of our great idealists, a man of sublime intentions, too good for the world he lived in.

An idiosyncratic anti-anti-Communism also persists often based, it seems, on a peevish, querulous disposition toward “cold warriors” and neoconservatives. It was memorably articulated by John Lukacs in an article called “The Poverty of Anti-Communism” in *The National Interest* in 1999. As with others of a similar mindset, in order to denigrate anti-Communism he dismisses retroactively the significance of Communism and the threat it represented, and even that of totalitarianism.

In what used to be called Soviet Studies, some adjustments have been made among the so-called revisionists.³ While the infor-

3 The major revisionist propositions may thus be summed up: 1) not even under Stalin was the Soviet Union totalitarian; 2) the United States and the West bear the majority of responsibility for the Cold War; 3) the number of victims of Communism has been greatly exaggerated by Western “cold warriors” and right-wingers; 4) population losses under Stalin had less to do with high-level decisions and ideology than the unanticipated consequences of certain well-meaning policies; 5) Marxism had nothing to do with the character of the Soviet systems and its policies.

mation coming from the former Communist states, and especially the Soviet Union, has compelled an upward revision of the number of their victims, the fundamental disposition of these authors has changed little. Perhaps the foremost representative of this school, J. Arch Getty continues to display a residual compulsion to dilute the responsibility of the Soviet regime for the human disasters it had created; above all he refuses to entertain the possibility that the ideas of Marx and Lenin had anything to do with Soviet-Communist political violence. He prefers to believe that the atrocities were unplanned, haphazard, "stupid," "incompetent," and not carried out by "a coldly efficient machine." In a review in *The Atlantic Monthly*, Getty was indignant about the moral equation of Nazism and Communism conveyed in *The Black Book of Communism* and irritated by what he regards as the excess of Western writings about Soviet repression, by the "Soviet specialists [who] provided us with a full menu of Communist atrocities."

It is easier to explain why people cling to long-held attitudes and beliefs than why they discard them. A fundamental revision of such identity-giving beliefs is painful and, more often than not, unrewarding. Former supporters of Communist ideologies and movements who publicly confessed of their misjudgments have often been dismissed as neurotic renegades, sellouts, people lacking in the capacity for steadfast commitment and unwavering idealism.⁴

Residual sympathy for leftist ideas and systems lingers because it is part and parcel of the wider currents of hostility to Western ideas and institutions, such as multiculturalism, radical feminism, postmodernism, deconstruction, and anti-globalism. All these are, in turn, nurtured by the continuing quest for spiritual values which would transcend the benefits that a market economy, consumer society, and political democracy offer. Russell Jacoby, in *The End of*

Utopia, rightly says that multiculturalism and the other trends noted have become substitutes for the utopian longings and beliefs discredited by the experience and fall of Communist systems: "Bereft of ideas, leftists and liberals . . . celebrate cultural pluralism to fill the void . . . the demise of utopia makes way for the party of multiculturalists."

The collapse of Soviet Communism also inspires regret on the grounds that it dealt a lasting blow to idealistic and desirable cravings for utopia. Again, as Russell Jacoby put it: "A utopian spirit—a sense that the future could transcend the present—has vanished. . . . There are no alternatives. This is the wisdom of our times, an age of political exhaustion and retreat." Not quite. Daniel Singer, for one, finds it "quite easy to imagine a radically different society emerging after a long . . . period of transition . . . [and] a complete overhaul of production . . . to fit an entirely new purpose" and "the abolition of the existing hierarchical division of labor" and the eventual vanishing of "the frontier between labor and leisure."

In the final analysis, the attitudes here discussed derive largely from an optimistic, and arguably reality-denying, view of human nature that, as Ken Brociner wrote in *Dissent* last winter, "dismiss[es] the possibility that the limitations of human nature itself might also be factors" in preventing the creation of "a socialist utopia." These attitudes, for Martin Malia, "spring eternal in our maladjusted world; nor will the failures of a mere century be enough to extinguish . . . [their] allure."

4 For example, Simone de Beauvoir wrote of "repentant communists" (such as Koestler and Kravchenko) that she was "astonished . . . by the lyric ecstasy of their hatred. . . . None of them proposed an analysis of the USSR or offered any constructive criticism; they were content to grind out romantic novelettes." There was "hysteria in their eyes," they were "maniacally suspicious" and purveyed "exotic stories," etc.

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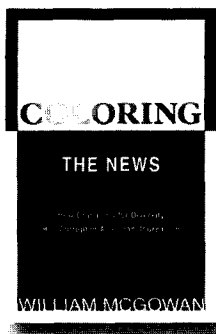
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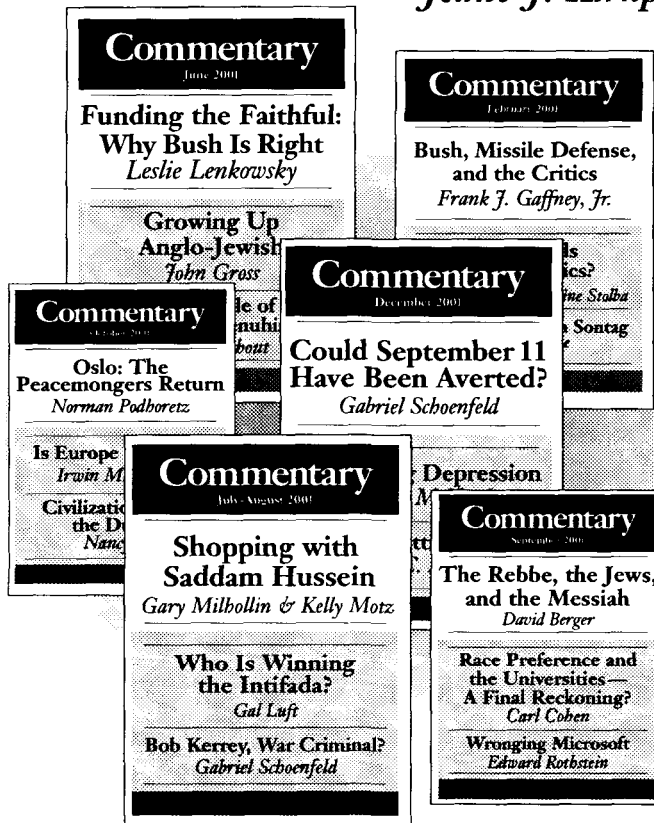


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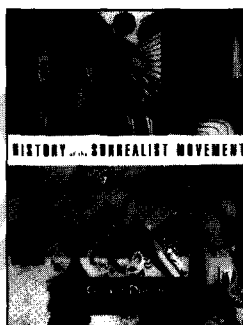
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A showcase of new and classic films which contribute to our understanding of political freedom, memorialize the victims of tyranny, and celebrate the priceless gift of a free and pluralistic culture.

In Berlin: February 10 gala presentation of the third Andrzej Wajda/Philip Morris Freedom Prize, to be presented to young East-German born Andreas Dresen ("Nachtgestalten"). February 8 through 10, new films and retrospectives from the Stalinist era to the present, followed by screenings in Los Angeles. Public shows are held in partnership with the Akademie der Künste.

In Los Angeles the Freedom Film Festival is Hollywood's annual remembrance of the human rights abuses caused by decades of Communist rule in Europe, reminding our own filmmakers that from time to time history will make profound and unexpected demands on their courage; that their audiences have a right to call on them for spiritual strength; that they might be required to put their hard-won careers at risk in order to defend the civic life of their people.

The program includes L.A. premieres of films about life under Stalin to life today: two tough-minded looks in the rear-view mirror: Andrzej Wajda's "The Condemnation of Franciszek Klos" and the Czech documentary "Velvet Hangover" by Robert Buchar; Ibolya Fekete's modern-day Candide- "Chico"-a young man born in Latin America of Communist parents and now a confused veteran of recent Eastern European conflicts; two very different Russian films, "True Stories," an adaptation of Zoschenko's 1920s Moscow tales, and "A Place On Earth" in which the basis of Russian society is questioned via religious

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and film metaphor; and a tribute to some of the most important Berlin filmmakers and film professionals who 'opened our eyes' to the East: Ulrich Gregor and Erika Gregor, Manfred Durniok, Volker Koepp and Ron Holloway. Complete descriptions are on the website.

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Kitagawa Utamarō
(1753 – 1806)
*Renowned Beauties Likened
to the Six Immortal Poets:*
Takashima Ohisa, ca. 1795
ōban tate-e 38 by 25.3 cm

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